

The Captain's Table



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I

CAPTAIN William Ebbs, M.B.E., Master of the Pole Star Line freighter *Martin Luther*, looked gloomily through the rain into the lower windows of his Company's office in Leadenhall Street. They were bright with shiny models of liners, sliced miniature cabins, coloured photographs of bronzing girls leaping for deck quoits, and sunny posters beckoning bronchitic Englishmen *Come to Australia!*—a cheerful picture of ship-board life which always upset him. So did the office itself, where every Captain was summoned in the fresh insignificance of his shore-going clothes, to be bullied by pale clerks or girlish secretaries and asked fogging questions about storm damage, sick seamen, and condemned stores reported and forgotten long ago in the voyage. These official visits had for many years seemed to Ebbs the severest penalties of command; but his present arrival was more heavily overshadowed by the certainty that he had come ashore to be sacked.

Ebbs was a tall, bony, mild-eyed man with fussy hands and awkward feet, a distortion of the conventional image of a ship's Captain, who now bore his

authority with the weary air of an underpaid school-master on the last day of term. As he entered the building he respectfully removed his weeping trilby, misshapen through long stowage in sea air and nibbled by a hundred insects unknown in English wardrobes, and revealed under his mackintosh a brown tweed suit that had apparently been recently used for storing potatoes.

'But Sir Angus was expecting you all afternoon, Captain!' said the girl inside, as he announced himself.

'I'm afraid I was delayed at the dock. How is he?' he added, as though asking if the blade were sharp.

'He seems rather out of sorts to-day, sir.'

Speculating briskly on the possibilities of shore employment, Ebbs followed her to the room where the Chairman of the Line sat among the teak and traditions of his former ships.

The Pole Star Company was founded in the eighteenthies by a red-bearded Orkney sea-captain called Andrew McWhirrey, who had roared his way round the China coast for forty years and by not troubling overmuch about working men and ships to death sailed into a fortune. He was a pious sailor, who screwed his personal indulgence down to a pipeful of tobacco at sunset and carried a Bible under his arm like a telescope. 'The harvest truly is plenteous, but the labourers are few!' he would shout at an idle deckhand, kicking him headlong into the scuppers; 'Abstain from fleshly lusts, which war against the soul!' he could roar at a drunken bos'n, knocking him over the poop rail. Drinking and gambling were forbidden in his ship, and every Sunday all hands were ordered aft for Church; he had a fine voice for reading prayers, and

it was said that no one could take a better burial at sea.

The present head of the Line was an attenuated form of old Andrew, whose portrait stared down with a salty eye from the wall. The fiery hair was reduced to a pair of fuzzy hedges on a pink scalp, the eyes that once split horizons were diluted with spectacles, and the voice that roared bloody threats into the fo'c'sle modulated politely for the telephone. But Angus McWhirrey was as tough a shipowner as his great-grandfather. As he could no longer use a belaying-pin or his boots he subjected his subordinates with daily lashes of confidential memoranda, which vetoed promotion and kept men he disliked in the Company's out-dated tramps until they were overtaken by retirement or heat-stroke.

For some seconds McWhirrey looked at Ebbs in the way his ancestor used to inspect errant members of the crew while deciding whether to flog them at the main-mast or blacken their faces with boiling pitch.

'Sit down, Captain,' he said quietly.

Ebbs obediently took the edge of a chair.

'Your report from Aden,' McWhirrey went on, 'contains many interesting passages. I am particularly struck by your remark. . . .' He found his place on the flimsy. '“The *Martin Luther* is no longer fit for the conveyance of freight, animals, or sailors, and I recommend that she be scrapped, scuttled, or when next in Australia presented to the Government for the detonation of atomic bombs.”' He looked up. 'Would you care to expand that, Captain? Just take your time. I have the whole afternoon to listen to anyone who knows more about the shipping business than myself.'

Ebbs felt the rain on his collar begin to soak down his neck, and said nothing.

For five years he had held impatient command of the *Martin Luther*, a long, low, hag of a ship creaking herself to a standstill across the oceans of the world. He had dutifully suffered her uncertain refrigeration that left the food suddenly rotten and rancid a week out of port; the electric light that dimmed and faltered nightly; the condensation that streamed down the cabin bulkheads and the cockroaches which paraded up them; the bewildering steering engine that set the ship cutting perilous circles in Sydney harbour; and the crew of malcontents, refused by a dozen masters of better vessels, who came every morning truculently to the bridge and generally ended their shore-leave in handcuffs. But the complaints that came hotly from his pen, kennelled in his cabin in the detachment of another hemisphere, froze and perished in the London air: he knew that the Pole Star Line expected its captains to fret in honourable silence.

'I was perhaps a little overwrought,' he murmured hopefully. 'The heat, Sir Angus. . . .'

'We do not expect our masters, who are in charge of lives and ships in tropical waters, to be affected by the heat like girl guides on a picnic.'

Ebbs rose. He could at least take his dismissal like a master mariner of the British Merchant Marine.

'Sir Angus,' he said with dignity. 'I have given twenty-five years of my life to this Company—since I was a cadet of sixteen, and in a far better ship than the *Martin Luther* I may say. I have always done my duty strictly in the Company's interests, as my father and my grandfather did before me. I had hoped that in time

virtue would not have to be its own reward, but I see that I was mistaken. As you no longer require my services, I will say good day to you, sir.' He replaced his hat with modest defiance. 'I am now going out to find myself a job. What or where, I have not the slightest idea, but at least it will be a change from the Pole Star Company. Who, I might tell you, Sir Angus,' he continued, feeling a little alarmed at himself, 'are the biggest bunch of robbers afloat since Captain Kidd. Good afternoon!'

'Captain Ebbs,' McWhirrey said patiently, 'You sometimes appear to be a bloody fool.'

Ebbs paused.

'It's not a question of dismissing you. I asked you here to promote you.' He pointed with his pencil to a rack on the wall like a train indicator, which reproduced the daily position of the Pole Star fleet. In one column were the fast white liners, which inherited their titles like aristocrats, enjoyed launchings like fashionable weddings, and had their movements recorded below the stock market in *The Times*; in the other, the fifty hard-worked unknown cargo boats, that crept from British ports with ensigns humbled to their big sisters to lose themselves for months at a time among the sweaty harbours of the Java Sea, the Persian Gulf, or the Queensland coast. 'You knew Captain Buckle was taken ill?'

Ebbs stared at him.

'Collapsed on the bus yesterday. A great pity, of course. Nevertheless, his ship still has to sail for Sydney on Monday. And we haven't a relief. We are therefore appointing you to the *Charlemagne*, Captain.'

'But she's a passenger ship!'

'So I was aware when my wife launched her.'

Ebbs struggled for coherence, swallowed, and stopped. Instead he blew his nose. He often did so to make a point, seize time to think, or relieve emotion.

'When can you go aboard?' Sir Angus asked.

'To-night—any time—this minute, if necessary.'

'To-morrow morning will be soon enough.' McWhirrey got up and paced thoughtfully across floorboards once trodden by a generation of angry shipmasters. 'Captain Ebbs, what makes you think we people in the office know nothing at all that goes on at sea? Of course the *Luther's* a bad ship. That's precisely why we kept you there. I'm not in the habit of handing out bouquets, but you made a good job of her—in your own way. At least you kept the vessel going and the crew alive, which is something of an achievement in the *Luther*. You must have more confidence in yourself, man! You're not a fourth mate any more. And try not to be so infernally fussy. It'll only upset your new officers.

'Fussy? Me fussy, sir?'

'I must make it quite clear that this new appointment is probationary. I gather Buckle's unlikely to return to sea. If you're a success we may therefore consider a permanency, despite your views on the company that pays you——'

'I meant it only . . . only as a joke.' Ebbs tried to smile.

'No doubt. Most amusing. With ordinary luck, and if you find your feet early enough, there's no reason why you shouldn't make a perfectly good Captain in the *Charlemagne*. But if you're not a success—back to the *Martin Luther*. You understand?'

Ebbs nodded.

'Very well. Then there seems nothing more for me to do except congratulate you on behalf of the directors. And of course wish you a most pleasant voyage.'

2

IN the Royal Navy a new Captain enjoys a stimulating welcome to his ship in a ceremony shrill with bo's'n's pipes and aflutter with salutes,⁴ but in the Merchant Service—even in such a courtly section of it as the Pole Star Line—his arrival is as unexciting as the appearance of a new stationmaster.

Early the next morning Ebbs arrived at Tilbury and stood on the quay, anonymous in his mackintosh, looking at the chilly white sides of the *Charlemagne* with the excitement of a cadet spotting his first ship. It had been his ambition to command a passenger liner since he had curled in his hammock as an unpleasantly spotty adolescent in the training vessel *Worcester*. Even his first sickly voyage and his first sea-going Captain—a booming six-footer who made his crew feel that the arrival of the Day of Judgement would now be something of an anticlimax—had not quenched his confidence of ascending with maturity to the bridge of a mail steamer. At twenty he had excitedly found himself appointed Third Mate of a Pole Star liner, and as he was a thoughtful young man who smuggled aboard books on training the mind instead of porno-

graphy he drew up a secret scheme to lead him to the comfort of a captain's cabin. He would do all the unsavoury tasks like checking the lifeboats and inspecting the bilge pumps, and report them to the Chief Officer as completed; he would ballast his slight sea-going experience with heavy reading from the *Manual of Seamanship*; and he would watch constantly for irregularities in the ship's structure and routine, informing the Captain while he took his daily walk alone before breakfast. This system led to Ebbs being thrown out of the ship at the end of the voyage, but discouragement settled on him only as he began to see the years ~~near~~ his goal: from Third Mate in a ship carrying a dozen passengers he was promoted to Second Officer in another with only three, to Chief Officer in a meat ship with no passengers at all, and lastly to be Captain of the *Martin Luther*, where his ambitions rapidly withered in her hot hull to aspiring command of any vessel with predictable steering.

Ebbs rapidly climbed the long gangway to the *Charlemagne's* after-deck.

'Good morning,' he said to the fat Quartermaster at the top. 'I'm the Captain.'

'No you ain't,' he said guardedly. 'The Captain's sick.'

'The new Captain,' Ebbs explained.

The man awarded him a sluggish salute.

'Is the Chief Officer aboard?'

The Quartermaster screwed up his eyes. 'Chief Officer, sir? No, sir. Not on board, sir. On leave.'

'Well, how about the Second Officer?'

'Ah, I know where he is. Ashore at the dentist's. The Purser's with the Customs, the Chief Steward's down

at the catering department, the Doctor don't generally show up till sailing day, and the Chief Engineer's turned in with a bad cold. Orders not to be disturbed, sir.'

'Who's keeping ship?' Ebbs said sharply.

'The Fourth, sir. Down the bottom of Number One hold.'

'Oh, very well, very well! You stay here and see my gear aboard. As I'm obliged to conduct myself to my quarters, I shall do so.'

'Sure you can find the way, sir?'

'To the sailor all ships are the same, Quartermaster,' Ebbs told him solemnly. 'They float on the water, they contain machinery, they feed you and sleep you. It is only the people inside them who differ. Kindly remember that.'

He strode off forward, gripping his trilby, his mackintosh flapping violently round his legs in the cold wind lightly loaded with snow that was blowing off the Estuary.

The *Charlemagne*, which was known to all British seafarers as the Charley Mange, was one of the smaller Pole Star liners. She was designed for six hundred passengers in the modern tradition of painstakingly flouting as many of the conventions of naval architecture as possible. Nothing could be done to the shape of her hull, for the *Cutty Sark's* has yet to be bettered; but the funnels that in the 'thirties numerically indicated a ship's vigour were swept into one truncated stack, the weary ventilators were cleared from her decks, and the masts reduced to a single spike above the bridge. Her first-class saloons repeated the modern idiom by assuming the ocean to be something shameful, to be

hidden away from the passengers as much as possible, had been decorated by an amiable young man who was hairy with tweed and rough with corduroy and had been no further to sea than the balcony of *The Prospect of Whitby*. She also offered tourist-class accommodation, found at the bottom of a narrow companionway leading towards the stern. The descent of these stairs had the same discouraging effect on a passenger seeking his cabin as a climb to the gallery in a London theatre: the pastel shades gradually hardened, the springy decking underfoot turned into ringing linoleum, the lights stared disagreeably through thick plain glass, and the sea breezes carefully directed by the designers into the first-class staterooms were replaced by the alternate smells of hot oil from the engine-room and hot fat from the galley.

Ebbs distributed glares at the cigarette packets, scraps of newspaper, spent matches, and empty beer bottles scattered everywhere by the dockers, giving the decks the look of a football stand on Saturday night. He had a sharp eye for untidiness beyond the blind spot of himself, and was already composing orders for cleaning up his ship when he reached the door labelled with brass dignity CAPTAIN.

He crossed the storm-step, and looked round his new apartments. In the *Martin Luther* he had occupied a green-painted steel nook between the gyro compass and the officers' oilskin locker, but command of the *Charlemagne* awarded him a day-cabin that was agreeably lined with polished wood and deep carpet, and would have comfortably accommodated the whole of his former crew. Remembering he was stepping into a sick man's home he abruptly took on an expression of

reverence; but this dissolved as he stepped through to his night-cabin and found himself provided with a double bed under a pink silk counterpane. He bounced on this several times with satisfaction, then went into the bathroom and playfully tried all the taps. Returning to the day-cabin, he stood in the middle of the deck with his hands clasped behind him and 'jauntily inspected the furniture. The Company had designed the cabin firstly for the entertainment of passengers, making it resemble the tea-lounge of a residential hotel. Apart from a desk the size of McWhirrey's, there were two pink sofas, several pink-and-gold easy chairs and matching tables, some pink-shaded lamps, three clocks, with pink faces, pink-flowered curtains on the scuttles, pink-framed pictures on the bulkheads, and an open hearth in which a pair of incombustible logs smouldered in a permanent pink electric glow. In one corner was a pink-and-gold cabinet Ebbs took for a wardrobe, which he opened and found full of glasses, bottles, and cocktail shakers. He suddenly began to laugh: after his daily wrestle for comfort with the *Martin Luther* this crowning luxury glittered with ridicule.

He heard a cough behind him.

'Ah, Purscr!' Ebbs recognized the white bands on his visitor's cuff.

'Good morning, sir. My name is Prittlewell. Herbert Prittlewell. I hope the cabin is satisfactory?'

'Perfectly, thank you.'

'I had your predecessor's gear removed as soon as I heard of his indisposition, sir.'

'Very sad, very sad,' Ebbs said, becoming solemn again. 'I have—ah, of course, sent some flowers and grapes and so forth.'

‘I’m sure you have, sir.’

Prittlewell looked at Ebbs shrewdly. As the *Charlemagne’s* hotel manager he spent his life assessing people, separating the ones who were genuinely important, wealthy, honest, or married from those taking advantage of the isolation of the sea to pretend they were. He was a tall grey handsome man with a monocle, like a cartoon Admiral, and he had a graceful manner that might have flowered first in Dartmouth, an older public school, or at least South Kensington. But Prittlewell had been to none of these places. He had begun as a fourteen-year-old bell-boy aboard a Pole Star liner, where he found that packages of soap, butter, tea, and cutlery could be safely smuggled ashore in a gutted copy of a Mission Bible and sold handsomely to the neighbours in his native Stepney. This spirit had quickly projected him through the lower ranks of stewards, but he soon became dissatisfied with such trivial scrounging and set himself to acquire book-keeping, good manners, and a wardroom accent, in order to achieve control of the dozen silent percentages and score of unmentioned favours that bring power and profit to the purser of a large liner.

‘I’ve brought your own gear up, sir,’ he said, as two stewards struggled in with the loaf-shaped leather trunk and dozen paper parcels in which Ebbs moved his possessions.

‘Thank you, Purser.’

‘This is your first command of a passenger ship, I believe, sir?’ Prittlewell had speculated more sharply than anyone on board about Ebbs’s accession to the *Charlemagne*, as his income depended largely on keeping the Captain’s eyes from his account books.

'I really can't see why that is of any importance,' Ebbs told him. 'To the sailor all ships are the same. They float on the water, they contain machinery, they feed you and sleep you. It is only the people inside them who matter. I should like you to remember that, please.'

'Certainly, sir.'

Ebbs sat down in his pink desk chair. 'I gather we have a full ship for the voyage?'

'Yes, sir. Not a spare shed.'

'I beg your pardon?'

'No unoccupied cabins, sir. Perhaps you would like to see the passenger list?'

'Ah, thank you!' Ebbs eagerly took a bundle of type-written flimsy. 'Nothing like starting work at once, eh? Well, well!' he murmured, flicking over the smudgy sheets. 'Remarkable, isn't it? Here are these people, whom I couldn't tell from Adam and Eve, and by the end of the voyage we'll all be firm friends and know each other inside out.'

'Most remarkable, sir.'

'If you will kindly give me half an hour,' Ebbs went on, 'I shall prepare a list of people I wish to sit at my table. A somewhat chancy selection, I think? Like picking horses. However, from the ages and occupations so thoughtfully provided by the head office, I should be able to gather some congenial company. I don't want any young women——'

'The Company have already sent me a list of passengers who will be sitting at your table, sir.'

'You mean I have no say in the matter at all?'

'None whatever, sir.'

He handed Ebbs another flimsy.

'But—but supposing I don't like these persons?'

'I'm sorry, but there's nothing you can do about it. You could take your meals in your cabin, I suppose, sir. But that would hardly recommend itself to the Company.'

'No, of course not.' Ebbs frowned. 'It's very inconsiderate.'

'You appreciate, sir, a seat at your table is an honour which carries a substantial social position on board?'

'Anyway, I shall have my breakfast in my cabin at sea,' Ebbs said decisively, tossing the papers on his desk. 'Breakfast is not a sociable meal. What's that?'

'The list of guests who will be attending your cocktail party, sir.'

'I appear to be in the position, Purser, of a child having its first birthday treat?'

Prittlewell's shoulders hesitated on a shrug. 'It's the custom of the Line, sir.'

'Ebbs was beginning to feel uneasy. The *Martin Luther's* catering had been managed by a beery Irishman with dirty finger-nails who obediently shuffled the few dishes on the menu at his command, but Prittlewell affected him like an undertipped head waiter.

'I don't suppose there's anyone in particular travelling with us, is there?' he asked, his good spirits evaporated. 'No—ah, celebrities?'

'There are six parsons, sir.'

'Six!' Ebbs was shocked. 'I'm not a superstitious man, Purser, but that augurs badly.'

'I agree, sir. One dog-collar is usually considered sufficient to blight a voyage. I was with Captain Graham in the *Hannibal* when he dropped dead in the middle of the fancy-dress dance. A party of missionaries

we were bringing back from Singapore was generally held responsible. And there were only four of them.'

'Let us sincerely hope these will prove less murderous,' Ebbs said sombrely. Prittlewell gathered the interview as at an end. 'I will hold a conference of officers to-morrow,' Ebbs added. 'Is there any sign of the Chief Officer?'

'Not on board yet, sir.'

'Not yet? But I sent the fellow an extremely urgent telegram. I'll have to wire again, that's all. What do you suppose could have happened to him?'

Prittlewell looked thoughtful. 'He may have been detained, sir,' he suggested.

'Detained? But how? Where?'

'The Chief Officer has many friends who press their hospitality in London,' Prittlewell told him. He thought that a reasonably honest reply.

3

JOHN Reginald Ernest Maitland Wilson Shawe-Wilson, R.N.R., Chief Officer of the *Charlemagne*, mounted the gangway early the next morning suffering from a bad hangover, lack of sleep, and surfeit of affection, his usual condition when returning from leave. He was also in a black temper. He had taken Ebbs' appointment as a personal insult. He would concede that youth prevented the Pole Star Line from offering command of the *Charlemagne* to himself, but to place above him the skipper of a seedy tramp, a rough-neck navigator, an ocean guttersnipe, was too much. And now the man was harrying him with telegrams, robbing him of his just leave, and curtailing the warm exploitation of his last voyage's romance with an active girl whom he had barely an hour before regretfully left in bed.

'The Captain wants to see you immediate, sir,' said the Quartermaster, saluting.

'He'll have to wait till I've changed. Get this bag taken to my cabin.' He dropped his suitcase on the deck.

Shawe-Wilson's cabin, unusually tidy through his absence, was a smaller and more nautical apartment

than Ebbs's, for the only entertaining of passengers therein was clandestine and usually conducted with the light out. The severe paint, brass, and woodwork was everywhere brightened by covers, cloths, and cushions presented to him at the end of voyages damp with the tears of their donors, half a dozen of whom looked yearningly from the locker in which he rummaged for his aspirin. He glanced warily in the bulkhead mirror and saw the face that had fluttered a thousand hearts on the boat-deck was pale and shadowed. He rang for tea and began his toilet. He showered, brushed his teeth with chlorophyl paste, rinsed his mouth with Listerine, shaved, massaged his cheeks with Eau de Cologne, dabbed deodorant under his arms, puffed talc between his toes, and sprinkled brillianine on his hair: every morning he took himself as a French chef accepts a raw lettuce, to be suitably oiled and dressed before presentation to the public. Scattering his shore-going clothes on the deck, he selected his best doeskin uniform, fresh from Gieves, drew shirt, collar, tie, socks, and handkerchiefs from monogrammed leather cases, dressed himself thoughtfully, then stepped from the cabin to face again his responsibilities.

It was not yet eight o'clock, and bacon and eggs were ready for *Charlemagne's* officers among the stacked chairs and rolled carpets of the first-class dining saloon. He found Ebbs, who like all clean-living men fondly relished his breakfast, already sitting at the head of the long table alone.

'Mr Wilson, isn't it?' Ebbs asked extending his arm cordially across the cloth.

'Shawe-Wilson. How do you do, sir.'

'I should have preferred to make your acquaintance earlier,' said Ebbs, feeling he must make a show of Captain's disapproval and anxious to get it over. 'I sent you two telegrams, both urgently requesting your return from leave.'

Shawe-Wilson sat down and reached for the coffee.

'I didn't get either of them till this morning,' he explained airily. 'I've been away in the country with the Purcells. Do you know the Purcells, sir?'

'No, Mr Shawe-Wilson. I do not know the Purcells.'

'Nice people. They came home with us last trip. I don't take titled passengers as a rule, but they offered to put me up for a week.' He began to talk enjoyably, exercising his flair for both lying and snobbery. 'They haven't much of a place, but they offer a decent bit of rough shooting. Do you shoot, sir?'

'No, Mr Shawe-Wilson. I do not shoot.'

'Your first command of a passenger ship, I hear?' the Chief Officer continued.

'That is not of the slightest importance, Mr Shawe-Wilson,' Ebbs said, becoming irritated. 'To the sailor all ships are the same. They float on the water, they contain machinery, they feed you and they put you up. Only the people inside them matter. Kindly bear that in mind.'

'Of course, sir. Pass the sugar, will you?'

Ebbs blew his nose. He had no wish to start the voyage by an open row with his chief executive, but he wondered where he had ever come across such an objectionable young man.

'After breakfast,' Ebbs said firmly, 'I should be obliged if you would conduct me round the ship. Unless, of course, you have other social engagements?'

'Chart pencils,' Ebbs declared, as they stood alone shortly afterwards in the cold chartroom. 'Where are the chartroom pencils, Mr Shawe-Wilson?'

'Generally stolen in port, sir,' Shawe-Wilson said wearily.

'Then you must see others are provided immediately. Chartroom pencils are navigational equipment, and navigational equipment is the responsibility of the Chief Officer. It is stated quite clearly in Company Regulations. What happens if there aren't any chart pencils? Why, we take an important bearing leaving port and by the time we've marked it on the chart we're aground. You may possibly consider me fussy, Mr Shawe-Wilson—it is a charge that I suppose might be made behind my back—but the efficient running of the ship depends on everyone being able to put their hands on things exactly as they want them.'

'Yes, sir.'

'And kindly see that the chartroom pencils, when provided, are used for nothing else but charts. It's impossible to rule a decent line with a pencil the Third Mate's been using for marking his laundry, or whatever Third Mates do with them.'

'Yes, sir.'

'Right, Mr Shawe-Wilson. Let us proceed. What else have we up here?'

'I suppose you want to see the accommodation for passengers' pets, sir?'

'I want to see everything. Lead the way, please.'

* * *

Ebbs summoned the officers' conference the following afternoon at five, an hour when the sailor's attention in

port drifts towards the gangway and the sweet inevitability of opening-time.

The change of command made no difference to most of the crew, to whom the Captain was as remote as God and as comfortably discountable in the arrangements of daily life, but to the men who lived next to him and could hear him singing in his bath he achieved a personal importance inconceivable to any landsman. Nelson had hardly been missed more sorrowfully by his shipmates than the easy-going Captain Buckle; and now this Ebbs had been sprung on them, unknown and unpredictably full of new notions, and they had to adapt themselves to him with the good grace of comfortable Civil Servants facing a violent change in government.

'Well, gentlemen, may I introduce myself?' Ebbs began jovially, anxious to start aright with the dozen or so men who gathered in the empty first-class smoke-room. 'I must say I should have appreciated a more active welcome on my arrival. But one must draw a moral, gentlemen—it has probably forestalled my feelings I might have of self-importance. We shall now say no more about it. My appointment to this vessel came as something of a shock—a sad shock, naturally, gentlemen—but with your co-operation I trust it will be a success. I am sure I can rely on you all for that.'

He beamed round the audience, who were inspecting him anxiously.

'No doubt before we sail my former crew will tell you—ah, all you wish to know about me,' Ebbs continued brightly. 'It's just that I have certain ways of doing things, and I shall be glad if you will do me the courtesy of observing them. I don't believe it's that I'm fussy, gentlemen. Not at all. I'm sure I do not deserve

the'—he blew his nose—'age and femininity I have occasionally heard ascribed to me by junior officers. As long as you stick to Company Regulations, gentlemen, you will find me a perfectly fair and understanding Captain.'

As each of his listeners had wormed a comfortable hole for themselves somewhere in the Company's laws for the conduct of its ships and its officers, they now began to exchange glances of alarm.

'I would particularly like to mention the subject of drinking,' Ebbs said. Half their faces fell. 'I am perfectly broad-minded, gentlemen, and realize the importance of an occasional drink as a stimulant. But after my years at sea I can safely say that I prefer on most occasions a good clean glass of water from the tap. I hope, gentlemen, I shall observe no drunkenness while at sea. The other point concerns mixing with passengers. Particularly female passengers.' The faces of the other half sagged. 'I hope my junior officers will abide by Company Regulations and stay clear of the passenger decks. To the true sailor passengers are merely animated cargo. However,' he went on, resuming his former cheerfulness and earnestly hoping he was making a good impression, 'I am sure we shall have a very happy voyage. This ship, which I see bears the proud name of an Emperor of the Goths —'

'Wasn't it the Franks, sir?' asked Brickwood, a plump young man, the Second Mate.

'Goths,' Ebbs said. 'I have naturally studied the names of all the ships in the Company's fleet. Emperor of the Goths, who lived some eight hundred years B.C.——'

'Wasn't it A.D., sir?' Brickwood asked.

‘Mr Brickwood, I really must ask you to let me make my point. I happen to have read the Company’s history with great care.’

‘I beg your pardon, sir.’

‘That is perfectly all right, Mr Brickwood. But to proceed——’

‘I felt you might have made a slip of the tongue, sir.’

‘Well, I haven’t. To proceed——’ Ebbs caught sight of a large painting above Brickwood’s head, of a man with high blood-pressure and yellow whiskers, entitled *Charlemagne, Emperor of the Franks, 742–814 A.D.* He blew his nose again. ‘Well, anyway, all ships are the same to the seafarer,’ he went on. ‘They float on the water, contain machinery, feed you and sleep you. Only the people in them matter. Remember that, gentlemen. Any questions?’

But the only points on which Ebbs had roused their curiosity were unmentionable in his hearing.

* * *

Ebbs usually spent his leave in a small house in Acton with his elder sister, a powerful woman who believed he was in a state of suspended adolescence, and before every voyage filled him with advice on the importance of washing his neck, changing his socks, closing his pores, and opening his bowels. His home life had been spread so thinly over his years afloat that he was now no more than a disturbing visitor to her house, whose memory was conscientiously kept afresh by the litter of souvenirs the sea had swept into the parlour, and the row of photographs on the mantelpiece which showed him gradually gaining rank and

losing hair in the Company's service. As Ebbs had no friends ashore and no interests outside his ship, he passed his few days in port energetically crawling round the *Charlemagne* from the cramped radar cabin high on her monkey island to the pipes packed like spaghetti in a box down in the duck keel. Whenever he returned to his cabin he found the desk piled more thickly with letters from the office and fierce memoranda from McWhirrey, most of which he was unable to understand. The rest of his time was occupied by the tailors' urgently fitting him for mess jackets and by listening to the Company's Marine Superintendent, who settled himself every morning in his best armchair with a fresh bottle of whisky and offered progressively pointless advice.

With a blast of alarm Ebbs realized three mornings later that within twenty-four hours his ship was due to sail. The accumulated injuries of her last voyage were still being repaired by grimy men with welding torches and blow-lamps who sliced steel fixtures from the decks, skinned the taintwork, and dragged pieces of machinery through the saloons, giving her the appearance of already being in the hands of the ship-breakers. The alleyways were still carpeted with oily canvas and choked with piles of mattresses, the cabin furniture was crammed into the bunks, the saloons were featureless under dust sheets, and it seemed to him that the ship would never be ready to receive the delicate mariners of her passengers list at all. But somehow the *Charlemagne* made herself ready for sea. Suddenly the decks were cleaned, set, and lit like a stage, the ruffians with reeking pails in the alleyways were turned into neatly white-jacketed urbane Pole Star stewards,

and flowers came aboard by the armful and telegrams in orange sheaves to illuminate the gloom of departure. The ship fell into the unusual silence that claimed her only immediately before and after every voyage, between the hammering of the repairers and the chatter of the passengers. And in the evening Sir Angus came aboard, an Admiral in a bowler hat, to make his inspection.

'You seem to have familiarized yourself with the vessel very well,' he conceded, as he walked with Ebbs along the deck afterwards.

Ebbs blew his nose in relief.

'You appreciate, I hope Captain, that this command will be somewhat different than your last?'

'I have always held, Sir Angus, that all ships are the same from the sailors' point of view. They float on the water, they——'

'Possibly. Seamanship is naturally the first consideration, but the passengers don't think twice about their safety these days--no more than you or I about the earth going round the sun. It's the size of their cabins and the size of their breakfasts that matter to them. The daily life on board.'

'The—ah, fun and games?' Ebbs suggested.

'The trouble is, we're now facing real competition for passenger traffic. Look at that,' he continued bitterly, pulling a folded magazine from his overcoat pocket. Ebbs inspected a coloured advertisement showing the soft-lined interior of an aeroplane, in which tall men in crisp suits and chic bewitching women sipped steady Martinis and chatted in a joyous intimacy appropriate to the 'Heavens. 'Glamorized bloody aeroplanes!' McWhirrey scowled. 'We have to

play their game, that's all. Fortunately we hold a few of the cards. Sunshine, moonlight . . . good food, cheap drinks . . . adventure, excitement, romance," he went on, as if mouthing the words of a foreign language. 'Our aim must be to make every voyage a holiday. You understand, Captain?'

'I shall certainly foster the holiday spirit, Sir Angus,' Ebbs told him earnestly.

'Each of our ships must provide a courtship for the young, a second honeymoon for the middle-aged and a rejuvenation for the elderly.'

'I'll do my best, sir,' he said more doubtfully.

'You're not married, are you?'

'Still single, sir.'

'Then I'll remind you that the margin between a Captain's social duties and impropriety may sometimes be dangerously narrow.' McWhirrey looked at him closely. 'Drink and women, you know.'

'I assure you, sir,' Ebbs said hastily, 'I am most abstemious. . . .'

'In a ship like this, where the bar's open twelve hours a day?'

'And as for the other, Sir Angus . . .' He smiled away the ridiculous.

'It may pay you to remember that the sea sometimes has a peculiar effect on women travelling alone,' said McWhirrey weightily. 'Like gin.'

They reached the door of Ebbs' cabin. McWhirrey stopped. 'You are in charge of a vessel containing a thousand lives and costing near on three million pounds. Do you feel absolutely confident to handle her in all circumstances? It not, now is the time to say so.'

'Perfectly confident, sir!'

Sir Angus nodded. 'Very well. I will be satisfied with that. By the way, you'll have to squeeze in an extra passenger. Fellow called Broster—Brigadier Broster. A big shareholder in the Line and an old personal friend of mine, as a matter of fact. A very decent chap. Just treat him as you would any other member of the passenger list—that's all he expects.'

'Broster? I'll remember that, Sir Angus.'

'Now how about a glass of whisky? It's a cold night.'

4

WHEN the *Charlemagne's* passengers had booked their berths in the elegant Pole Star passenger office in Cockspur Street, the voyage had the excitement of the distant battle of new recruits. But the weeks slipped surprisingly away, until they suddenly found themselves rubbing their breakfast with the faint appetite of departing voyagers, and wondering where the devil the passports had got to and how they could finish the packing. Their last morning fled treacherously: too soon came the alarming peal of the door-bell and the impatient peak-capped man on the mat. Jumping on their stubborn cases, collecting their children in a flurry of smackings, leaving a hundred things unpacked and unsaid, they started in panic for the station. Gathering under the smoky glass arch, horrified at the sight of their irrevocable companions for the next four weeks, they waited pathetically in the bitter wind blowing down the rails as their luggage and children kept perversely disappearing into the crowd, while porters with electric trolleys drove sportively through them like tanks among demoralized infantry. The boat trains dragged them

through the sulphurous tunnels and round the soot-pickled tenements of the East End, and left them at Tilbury to be barked into pens by officials and bent beneath the humiliating governmental rites of departure. At last they were allowed to cross the moat of muddy Thames water to their ship under the farewell glances of policemen, searching hopelessly in their pockets for the tickets by which the Pole Star Line undertook to transport them to Australia, specifically refusing responsibility for their loss *en route* by storm, fire, shipwreck, stranding, thunderbolt, strike, mutiny, revolution, war, plague, or pirates.

The decks rang with Sirs and Madlams as their baggage was snatched by the stewards, who were already accurately calculating the size of their eventual tips. Prittlewell stood bowing by the first-class gangway, suavely deflecting the earliest questions and complaints; the ship's officers leant eagerly from the boat deck, assessing every girl coming aboard through the bridge glasses; and Shawe-Wilson strode through the incoming passengers with his cap at a Beatty angle, issuing curt commands to surprised sailors whenever he sensed a sufficient audience of young women.

The only man idle in the animated ship was Ebbs. As nobody seemed to want him and he could think of no one to summon, he was alone in his pink cabin sitting uncomfortably on his sharp anticipations. He was not an imaginative man, but as he looked through the scuttles at the thickening snow that would shortly be falling on his own exposed shoulders he could clearly see at least a dozen ingenious disasters that might shortly overtake the *Charlemagne*.

The ship sailed with four tugs pulling her into the truculent wind like puppies biting on their leads, while the B.B.C. announcer, warm and dry in his studio, cosily forecast imminent severe gales in Dover, Wight, Portland, and Plymouth, right across her path. From the first salvo of breaking glasses as she started pitching in the short-tempered Channel seas, the passengers began to reel and falter under the weather's attack. They lay miserably gripping the rails of their lively bunks as the ship steamed unhappily through the night away from England, and the next morning only a few inscnsitive travellers appeared on the rainy decks, calling bravely to each other 'It'll be worse in the Pay!' Then she turned south round Ushant and crossed the bellicose Atlantic rollers on their way to pound the coast of France, and even these hearties groaned in their cabins or stared torpidly at the blue-and-gold cards stuck over every wash-basin saving, *The Captain, Officers, and Crew of R.M.S. 'Charlemagne' Wish You a Most Pleasant Voyage.*

The ship reduced speed as crockery fell like September fruit and the legs of men and furniture stood in jeopardy; then she jumped and quivered in the waves all down the long Iberian coast from Cape Maisterre to St Vincent. The crew had never known such weather, even old hands who held that modern gales, like modern beers, had nothing of their former manly strength. By cheerful shipboard superstition the blame for their misfortune had to be laid on someone, and although a few hands accused the six parsons who now rolled feebly in their bunks below, to most of the crew the Jonah who had attracted the spiteful Heavens was clearly Ebbs.

The *Charlemagne* reached Gibraltar before the weather changed. The wind and sea dropped away from her in exhaustion, the sun rose in shameless splendour, and she sailed past the Rock into a day of spacious blue sky punctured by fast neat white clouds. A warm breeze swept through the freshly-opened scuttles and blew away the smell of vomit, the decks began to steam and dry in the sun, and the passengers rose like a graveyard at the Resurrection.

That morning Ebbs came jauntily into his cabin from the bridge, throwing his damp greatcoat on to a pink sofa.

'A welcome smell!' he said, rubbing his hands.

'Good morning, sir,' said Albert Burtweed, the Captain's Tiger. 'Your breakfast.' He uncovered a silver dish on the freshly-docile table, as though presenting the plate in church. 'Kidneys, bacon and a chop, sir.'

The Tiger was a thin, neat man, with oval gold-rimmed spectacles, a bald head ringed with white fluff, and a bad case of widely divaricating toes known among ocean stewards as 'Cunard Feet.' Without his white Pole Star jacket he had the pleasantly diffident appearance of a pensionable clerk or an undernourished clergyman; but he was a true sailor who distrusted paving-stones, and had penetrated the five continents no further than the first bar by the dock where he could buy a glass of beer and talk tenderly of England. Burtweed had neither roof nor relatives ashore and lived continuously in his ship, spending his forced spells of separation during fumigation and overhaul in the chilly galleries of the Sailors' Home. He was an insinictive servant, of the type now forgotten on land and becoming rare even at sea, who for more than

forty years had skilfully balanced trays down Pole Star alleyways and could never serve a soup-plate without dignity nor fold a handkerchief short of perfection.

'An inauspicious start to the voyage, sir,' Burtweed said, spreading a napkin over his master's lap as he sat down. He had not yet had a chance to assess Ebbs, but he already looked on him as 'His Captain' in the way a farmhand regards a bull or pig entrusted for feeding and cleaning to his care, and he was determined to make him a prizewinner.

'Not entirely, Burtweed,' Ebbs said cheerfully. 'We must draw a moral. I have experienced handling the ship in the worst possible weather, and although it's been something of a strain I know I have nothing more to fear in that direction. I can start turning my energies to more social duties.'

'Are you partaking luncheon in the saloon, sir?'

Ebbs swallowed a mouthful of kidney, and shook his head. So far he had eaten his meals on the bridge, and had hardly penetrated further into the ship than his cabin. 'As I haven't had my clothes off since leaving London I feel entitled to turn in for the morning. Kindly bring me a pot of tea and some bread and jam about two.'

'Yes, sir. And dinner, sir?'

'I fancy I shall be strong enough to face the passengers by then. I only hope they will have equal fortitude.'

'Very good, sir.' Burtweed glanced modestly at Ebbs's meagre belongings, spread thinly over the cabin. There was a pokerwork pipe-rack, a photograph in a fretwork frame of his cadet group, a tobacco-jar like a decapitated Toby jug, a rope mat woven on his first voyage, a paperweight shaped like a modest mermaid, a free-

gift set of Dickens between a couple of owls, a small unidentifiable object inscribed *Un Cadeau de Cherbourg*, a coloured picture of Windsor Castle, an inkstand suspended in a horseshoe, and a calendar that told the date for a hundred years either way.

'The arrangements are satisfactory, sir?' he asked.

'Perfectly satisfactory, thank you, Burtweed. Though I must confess to feeling somewhat lost in these apartments. I suppose Captain Buckle got used to them in time?'

'The poor gentleman's hobby took up a good deal of room, sir,' Burtweed said sadly, picking up Ebbs's great-coat. 'He spent most of the time at sea making bits of furniture. Though with respect to him, sir, it's a relief to get rid of all them chips and shavings.'

'I have no hobbies, Burtweed,' Ebbs told him solemnly, cutting into his chop. 'Only my ship.'

'Very laudable, sir.'

There was a knock on the jalousie door and Prittlewell entered, tucking his cap under his left arm with a flourish.

'Good morning, Purser! How are the passengers?'

'As hungry as savages, sir.'

'Excellent, excellent! And what can I do for you?'

'I have a list of your social engagements during the voyage, sir.'

Ebbs's cheerfulness diminished.

'Not only my meals and my guests but my life is to be arranged for me?'

'It's the custom, sir.'

Ebbs glanced through the long dated list as he buttered a piece of toast. 'Sports Committee, Bathing Beauty Competition, Deck Cricket, Debating Society,

Old Tyme Dancing, Horse Racing, Treasure Hunt, Divine Service, Bingo. . . . Is my presence strictly necessary at all of these?

'The passengers expect it, I'm afraid, sir.'

'But what about this—Children's Tea Party. What possible use can I be at a function like that? That's going a bit far, I must say.'

'I think I should tell you that Lady McWhirrey in London makes a particular point of the Captain being present, sir. And here is a plan of your table in the saloon.'

Ebbs took a card on which was typed:

Miss Annette Porter Williams

Mr Dancer

Mrs Judd

Mrs William Coke

Mr William Coke

Canon Swingle

Mrs Lomax

Mrs Porteous

Mr Willy Boast

THE CAPTAIN

'Do you know anything about these people, Punter?' Ebbs asked hopefully. 'Any tittle-tattle that might help to make conversation?'

'I've seen most of them in my time,' Prittlewell said, as if discussing a music-hall bill. 'The Cokes are Australian millionaires—hearts of gold, but rather vulgar. Wool, you know. Old Mrs Lomax is travelling for her health. Boast writes books about cricket——'

'Does he, indeed? I admit I spend my life a thousand miles from the nearest blade of grass, but I know enough of the game to make a reliable source of conversation out of him, at least.'

'I doubt it, sir. He's been drunk since we left Tilbury. And the rest have been seasick.'

'Ebbs's face fell. 'Dinner may be something of a trial to-night then, I fear?'

'Oh, undoubtedly, sir. Captain Buckle always said he'd gladly give a month's pay to get out of the first dinner at sea. And I have a note for you, sir.' He handed Ebbs an envelope marked PRIVATE AND CONFIDENTIAL. 'It's from Brigadier Broster.'

Ebbs opened the letter and read:

Dear Captain

I have never been so grossly insulted in my life. I altered my arrangements at the last moment specially to travel in this ship, at great personal inconvenience, and I have been put for my meals at a draughty table by the door (I suffer severely from lumbago) miles away from the galley so the food arrives stone cold, next to a ventilator steaming me with the smell of the engine-room, and in the exclusive company of five clergymen. I am not complaining. I may be a large shareholder in this Line and a personal friend of your Chairman, but I want to be treated exactly like any other passenger. Fair's fair. But on other Pole Star ships (not to mention Orient and P. & O.) I am at least offered a place at the Captain's table. Please take what action you think fit.

I have the honour to be, etc.,

Roger Broster

Ebbs gasped. 'But I've never received a letter like this in my life!' He blew his nose agitatedly. 'He seems a very difficult customer, Purser.'

'Renowned for it in the Line, sir. It was him who got Captain Isleworth chucked out of the *Maximillian*.'

'Oh, did he?' Ebbs asked lackly. 'Perhaps we'd better put him at my table, then. We could turn out

this Canon fellow. Stick him with the other reverend gentlemen. They'll have a lot to talk about.'

'As you wish, sir.'

'That will be all,' Ebbs said, feeling he had heard enough.

'Very good, sir. We shall expect you for dinner.'

'Burtweed,' Ebbs said when Prittlewell had left. He had been staring for some minutes at the uncommunicative names of his guests.

'Sir?'

'You have been Tiger to a good many Captains, I believe?'

Burtweed smiled benevolently. 'My twenty-fourth, sir. And as nice a bunch of gentlemen as you could expect to meet,' he continued modestly, as if talking of his own successful children.

'Quite. I'll admit that I'm becoming a little uneasy about entertaining for dinner to-night nine complete strangers, one of whom has already sent me an extremely offensive letter.'

'It takes all sorts to make a passenger list, sir,' said Burtweed generously, starting to clear away the dishes.

'I wondered if you had any—ah, advice, any experience of former Captains to draw upon, as it were?' Ebbs asked him. 'What did Captain Buckle say to the passengers, for instance? Surely he had some sort of small talk up his sleeve?'

'I am proper glad you asked, sir,' Burtweed said with feeling. 'Really I am, sir. Very difficult it can be sometimes at table, and I—I——' He stared at his feet and swallowed. 'I *do* want you to be a success, sir. Not being able to offer advice unasked——'

'You are asked, Burtweed, you are asked.'

'Thank you, sir. Well, sir. The first thing, you must tell a funny story.'

Ebbs rubbed his chin. 'I don't think I know any funny stories.'

'Captain Buckle only had one, sir. He told it every voyage.'

'You remember it, Burtweed?'

'Bless us, yes sir! Fifty times I must have heard it, regular twice a voyage. It was a real scream, sir.'

'Perhaps you could repeat it to me?'

'With the greatest of pleasure, sir. It was about a Captain and a Chief Engineer——'

'Perfectly proper, I hope?' Ebbs asked severely.

'Oh, perfectly, sir! Never bring a blush to a cheek, Captain Buckle wouldn't. You see, this Captain, sir, was—with great respect—one of the old school, sir, and always heaved the lead when his ship was coming into port, like in the old days before echo-sounders and all that, sir. Well, this Captain prided himself he could tell what port they was in just by looking at the lead, sir, and seeing the mud what was brought up from the sea bottom. But one day the Chief Engineer grabs the lead, sir, on its way to the bridge, takes it to his cabin, and wipes his best boots on it. The Captain takes one look at it, you see, sir, and says to the mates: "Gentlemen," he says, "I have the honour to inform you that the ship is now situated at the corner of Sauchichall Street and Argyll Street."'

There was silence.

'I see,' Ebbs said. He thought deeply, scratching his ear. 'Not a bad tale.'

'Had the passengers in fits sometimes, sir. Captain Buckle called it his ice-breaker.'

'It might possibly be not unamusing if told skillfully,' Ebbs decided. As a junior officer he had been tolerated as a shipboard raconteur, though he felt his skill had withered in the solitude of captaincy. 'I'll think it over, anyway,' he promised. He gave Burtweed a grateful nod. 'I intend to spare no pains to make to-night a success.'

5

THE gentle Mediterranean, a longer civilized sea than the boisterous Atlantic, greeted the *Charlemagne* serenely with mild airs and charmed her through the day with courteous waves towards the North African coast. As the passengers' physiology was no longer strained by the weather they were able to exercise it vigorously in all directions: they ate heartily, slept soundly, walked the decks briskly, drank deeply, and made love lustily. The players skipped like early lambs on the deck-tennis courts, the girls pranced in premature swimsuits under the January sun, and all the young men pursued them round the decks unflaggingly.

At nightfall the ship became a gently-moving constellation, and the stewards' scales on the musical dressing-gongs signalled the start of a sportive ship-board evening. The passengers shook out their dress clothes and set the bell indicators flashing in the pantries like pin-tables, while in the first-class smoke-room Scottie the barman, his hair and snout carefully fixed, rattled a summoning tattoo with the leaping ice in his shaker. The passengers hastened to break their

sickly abstinence, no longer the frozen bunch who had struggled thankfully up the gangway at Tilbury: they sat at ease in the well-advertised Pole Star luxury, ordering widening rounds of drinks and letting their personalities expand like sponges in the sea air.

A tall man with a white bristly moustache entered the smoke-room, paused at the door, assessed the company swiftly and without relish, and bowed towards a group sitting below a mural of three nude women floating on a blue sea like pink rubber ducks.

'Good evening!' he boomed, striding across. 'You will permit me to introduce myself? Name of Broster—Brigadier Broster. We're all at the Captain's table, I believe?'

He faced three people: a fat man with a complexion like a cut ham, a muscular blonde in a pink dress, and a pale pretty woman in black.

'It's a pleasure, Brigadier!' The fat man held out his hand. 'My name's Coke—Bill to you. I'm from Sydney. This is the sweetest little woman in the world—my wife Gwenny.'

'My now, isn't that nice?' said the blonde, shaking hands heartily.

'And our very pleasant shipboard friend, Mrs Judd.'

'Charmed, madam,' Broster said gruffly.

'Park yourself, Brigadier,' Bill Coke invited. 'Take a grog on us.'

'Not a bit, not a bit!' Broster assumed command of a chair. 'Much easier to leave it to me, I assure you. Steward!' The head smoke-room Steward hastened adroitly between the tables. 'Same stewards, I see, Mutt and Jeff,' Broster observed casually. 'Ah, Steward! Set

up this round again, and tell Scottie to give me my usual.'

'Yes, sir! At once, sir! On behalf of the smoke-room hands, may I welcome you back, sir?'

'You certainly seem to know the ship well, Brigadier,' said Mrs Judd.

'Know it?' Broster laughed. 'Madam, I practically own it!'

They were impressed into silence.

'Steward!' Broster called, as soon as he tasted his drink.

'Sir?'

'Look here, Scottie can do better than that. Not a patch on his usual standard. Missed out the Cointreau altogether, I shouldn't be surprised. The proper way to make a White Lady,' he continued forcefully to his companions, 'is a couple of jiggers of gin, a jigger of lemon juice fresh from the fruit, and a whole jigger of Cointreau. That's how I've been making it all my life, at any rate. In England,' he continued to the Cokes, as the Steward bore away the offending drink on a cloud of apologies, 'we often mix our own cocktails. We sometimes like to entertain our guests without servants in the room. We keep cellars in our houses—often very expensive cellars—and take great pride in them. Which reminds me of a very interesting story about cocktails. I recall I had some feller to dinner at my house—can't remember his name, but he was some M.P. or other— and I told him I'd mix him any damn cocktail he'd care to mention. Any damn one. So he said he'd have a Chinese Dragon. And I *made* him a Chinese Dragon. After he'd drunk it he said, "Ah, but that wasn't a *real* Chinese Dragon. They're only

made with arrack distilled in a particular place I happen to know in Hong Kong." So I showed him the bottle, and by George! It *was* genuine arrack, and it *did* come from that particular distillery. What do you think of that?

Nobody said anything.

'Got to keep an eye on these people,' Broster went on, indicating the bar. 'Discipline's bound to be slack—new Captain, you know.'

'Why, we haven't seen the Captain yet, Bill?' Gwenny exclaimed, as if mentioning some interesting feature of the *Charlemagne's* structure.

'Aw, give him a chance, Gwenny,' her husband grunted. 'He was stuck on the bridge in that storm.'

'He's quite a young man, I believe?' Mrs Judd asked. *

Gwenny giggled. 'And good looking?'

'I must remind you ladies,' Broster said, 'what sailors are!' He laughed heartily, and winked at Mrs Judd. 'That reminds me of a very interesting story about this ship—'

* * *

Ebbs was meanwhile declaiming to his shaving mirror: 'There was once a Captain I sailed with as a cadet, who insisted on heaving the lead whenever he brought his ship into port. Just as he had been taught when he was a cadet himself. None of your scientific instruments on the bridge in those days, eh, ha ha! Ah Burtweed,' he said, as the Tiger came into the bathroom carrying a silver tray. 'I've decided to tell this story of yours in the first person. It gives it more point.'

'Very true, I'm sure, sir.'

'What's that?' Ebbs asked.

'A large gin, sir. I thought you might need it.'

'I am not a drinking man, Burtweed, but I must say there are times when a stimulant is welcome.' He wiped the lather off his lips and swallowed the glassful. 'None of your scientific instruments on the bridge in those days,' he continued between razor-strokes. 'We sailed by our five senses and were proud of it. Now the Chief Engineer—and I'm sure, Brigadier Broster, you will appreciate this point as a shipping man yourself—he digressed to the towel-rail—had taken a dislike to the Captain, and said ——' He paused, razor in mid-air. He thoughtfully wiped the lather on a towel. Should he make the Chief Engineer a Scot? 'And said, "Och aye, mon, ye canna tell wheer ye are wi' yon wee chunk o' lead——" Blast!' he exclaimed. He'd missed out the most important part, about the mud. 'Burtweed!' he called. 'Another gin, if you please.'

By the time Burtweed had helped him into his heavy stiff mess-jacket, bright with new gold braid, Ebbs was beginning to float pleasantly on an unaccustomed amount of alcohol.

'I look somewhat like a cigarette advertisement,' he said with unusual heartiness, eyeing himself in the long mirror. 'But I suppose the total effect is roughly what was intended. This bum freezer fits all right?'

'Very tasteful, sir, I assure you.'

'Now, that story, Burtweed.' Ebbs pulled down his lapels decisively. 'I'm going to pad it out a bit—explain what the ship was doing, where she was going, why the Chief Engineer disliked the Captain, and so forth.'

'Captain Buckle sometimes made it last as long as four courses, sir.'

'I shall be glad enough if I can spread it over the soup. I don't know what the devil we shall talk about after that. The Lord will provide, I hope.'

'Yes, sir.'

'Are my trousers all right?'

'I could have done with a bit longer, sir.'

'Well, that was impossible. I must buy another pair in Sydney.'

From below came the faint climes of the ship's gong: to Ebbs it sounded like the step of the executioner.

'My tie's straight?' he asked nervously.

'A treat, sir.'

'This is a big moment, Burtweed.' He ran his finger inside his stiff collar. 'A very big moment. Still, such things are sent to try us. As there's no point in delaying, I shall go down.'

Burtweed stopped him 'Just one thing, sir.'

'Yes?'

'Your suspenders, sir.'

'What about them?'

'You have none on, sir.'

'I never wear them,' he said defiantly. After several squabbles with his sister, he still enjoyed the comfortable limpness of his socks.

'Oh, sir!' said Burtweed sorrowfully.

'But this is ridiculous! What a time to start talking about suspenders—are you out of your mind, man? Who on earth will know about it?'

Burtweed lowered his eyes. 'I shall know, sir.'

'Anyway,' Ebbs told him firmly. 'I haven't got any.'

'Will you wear mine, sir?' Burtweed pleaded. 'Just for to-night? Please, sir! It would make all the difference, I assure you, sir-- —' He snatched up his trouser-legs,

detached two greasy bands of mauve elastic from his skinny calves, and clipped them round Ebbs's submissive shanks. 'There, sir!' he said triumphantly. 'Now, sir, you are properly dressed all through.'

'At least I appreciate the thought,' Ebbs said grudgingly.

'Good luck, sir!' said Burtweed hoarsely. 'And don't worry, sir—I shall be there.'

There was a moment of illuminating sympathy between man and man, then Ebbs hurried away to dinner.

6

THE first class dining saloon in the *Charlemagne* fell agreeably on the senses: it was the Polar Star Line's biggest selling-point. The tables glittered with lavish silver, the sideboards were hedged with gilt baskets of politely polished fruit, the stewards were waiting attentively in shining jackets, the band played mildly in the corner, and the cold buffet stretched the length of one bulkhead as brightly as a herbaceous border. Elbs's stately table dominated the saloon from the far end: the Chief Engineer, Chief Officer, Purser, and Doctor each commanding a corner. They were the only representatives of the *Charlemagne's* crew in sight: her swarm of junior officers, who were strictly forbidden the passenger decks at all, dined separately in a mess-room far below in the unsophisticated atmosphere of enamel teapots and mustard pickles.

Immediately the gong sounded in the smoke-room, Broster rose and said: 'Must be getting in. After all, we at the Captain's table are expected to set something of an example. In England,' he explained to Bill Coke as though addressing an Aztec, 'we try to preserve some of the disappearing standards of behaviour.'

We generally go into dinner in pairs. I like to see these manners kept up in the Pole Star Line. In the first-class, of course. Madam——' He bowed to Mrs Judd. 'May I offer you my arm?'

'Delighted, Brigadier.'

'C'mon Gwenny,' Bill Coke said, sticking out his elbow. 'Hook on.'

By the time Ebbs reached the saloon door his table was already seated. He hesitated, pulled the Purser's card from his pocket, and set the names of the guests in his mind like a round robin. Then the glass doors were flung open by a pair of bowing stewards, and with a tweak at his tie he stalked resolutely through the chattering diners to his place.

He came to a stop at his chair.

'Good evening,' he said.

He looked quickly round the table. On his left he saw a honey-haired woman with bared shoulders; on his right, a man with thick spectacles and a floppy bow-tie, obviously drunk; between them, a frightening circle of unknown faces. And they saw a tall, worried, pleasant-looking man, with ruffled hair, a brand new mess-jacket, a crooked bow, and a pair of trousers that appeared to have been snatched urgently from the cleaners before reaching the presser.

'Good evening, Captain,' came raggedly from the table.

Ebbs sat down. He slowly picked up the stiffly-coned napkin in front of him, while his guests watched as if he were about to produce a pair of live rabbits from underneath.

'I wonder if you've heard the funny story . . .' he began. But at that moment everyone else said:

'Isn't it wonderful how calm the sea . . .?'

'Don't you think the menu's . . .?'

'Wasn't the sunset . . .?'

'Where have we got to in the . . .?'

'Can I pass the . . .?'

'Isn't it a real cow of . . .?'

They all paused, and looked at each other. Silence returned.

'Soup, sir?' Burtweed asked quickly.

'Thank you, Burtweed, soup.' Ebbs shook his handkerchief from his sleeve and wiped his forehead. The first course was served, and eaten, like a funeral feast.

'Perhaps you've heard the funny story. . . .' Ebbs began again, the determination of a lifetime at sea behind him.

'No, do go on' the table exclaimed. They settled their eyes on him like schoolchildren with a new teacher.

'Well, it— it isn't hilariously funny really,' Ebbs mumbled, his nerve faltering.

'Please! Please go on, Captain!'

'Well, you see,' Ebbs swallowed. 'There was once an old Captain I knew, trained in the days of sail . . . one of the old sea-dogs, in fact.'

On his left, Mrs Porteous burst into uproarious giggles.

'One of the old sea-dogs,' Ebbs repeated warily, keeping his eye on her. 'Trained in the days of sail. When ships were propelled by—ah, sail.'

Seeing the funny point had not yet been reached, Mrs Porteous immediately silenced herself and followed his words with exaggerated attention.

'And whenever he took his ship into port, this Captain, he always had his Quartermaster standing by to heave the lead. In the old-fashioned way, you understand. You see, he was an old-fashioned Captain.'

'For whom the turbot?' demanded Burtweed.

As the second course was set on the table the cutlery tinkled in Ebbs's ear like dentists' instruments. He prayed that food might seduce the passengers' minds away from entertainment; but they returned to him with fearful politeness.

'Do go on, Captain! Yes, do tell us!' they insisted. 'We're dying to hear! Please, Captain! We're all listening!'

'Well,' Ebbs continued, warming up a little. 'He ordered the Quartermaster to heave the lead to see how much water there was under the ship. . . .'

'How?' asked Bill Cloke

'I beg your pardon.'

'How did he see how much water there was under the ship?'

'Shhhhh, Billy!' his wife called across the table. 'Don't bitch up the Captain's story.'

'No, I'm interested, darling,' he said impatiently. 'Put me wise, will you, Captain? How did this lead show what water there was under the ship?'

'Well, you see . . .'

'Don't mind my asking, Captain, do you?'

'No, no, not at all,' Ebbs assured him. 'It's a very simple principle, really. The lead hits the bottom, and . . . and shows how deep it is.'

'Yes, but how's he got it up again?'

'It's on a line.'

'On a line! Now I get it.'

'You're a dumb cluck, Bill,' said his wife.

'Please go on with your story, Captain,' said Mrs Judd quickly.

'Well,' Ebbs persisted, 'this Captain had a boast. He claimed he could tell exactly where the ship was, in any part of the world, just by looking at the mud from the bottom of the sea, which sticks to the lead when it's brought up.'

The table, certain this was the climax, broke into amazed exclamations: 'No! Never! Really? Impossible!'

'Yes,' Ebbs continued grimly. 'Wh rever the ship was——'

'Steward!' Brigadier Broster shouted across the saloon.

'Sir'

'It is my fixed practice always to make my own salad dressing. As I have salad at every meal you had better get used to it now. I shall require some vinegar—tarragon vinegar. You have tarragon vinegar? Best olive oil, the white of an egg, a clove of garlic, a sprig of parsley, borage, and chopped almonds. And I must have a silver dish to mix it in. Terribly important to take plenty of roughage at sea,' he continued to the table. 'No wonder there's so much constipation on ships. I've travelled round the world a couple of dozen times, and I think I can speak with some experience. In England, you know, we grow our own vegetables. We have large gardens attached to our houses, and employ several gardeners. I haven't put my teeth into a foreign vegetable for forty years. Not one! Just think of that. I should like to see everyone on board forced to take at least once a day a home-grown green salad, which

contains vitamins A, B, C, and D, together with certain salts and minerals. . . .'

Bugadier Broster trampled heavily over the conversation for several minutes, and as he paused to order chicken *en casserole* Fbbs said 'But one day the Chief Engineer wiped his boots on it, and the Captain said,' "Well, gentlemen, it seems the ship is at the corner of Sauchiehall Street and Argyll Street"'

There was immediate silence. Everyone looked at him in amazement.

'I didn't quite catch Captain,' called old Mrs Lemon, shaking her head and smiling.

'It doesn't matter,' said Fbbs miserably. 'It was nothing.'

Partaking entre-soir" Burtweed asked gaily

* * *

Shaw-Wilson had meanwhile outstripped Fbbs in conversation. As the saloon seating was arranged by the Purser and shipboard administration is largely a matter of reciprocal favour, he found himself dining alone with five pretty girls.

'But what a lot of medals you've got,' said the blonde on his right.

'Oh, those.' He looked at his campaign ribbons as if noticing them for the first time. 'One more or less couldn't hurt picking up bones in convettes.'

'Convettes?' the girls gasped. *The Cruel Sea* lapping sombrely at their memories.

'Yes, actually,' he said carelessly. He snapped his fingers. 'Steward! More chicken.' He was a hearty eater out of port.

The five girls regarded him with open admiration. His mess-jacket sat perfectly on his shoulders, his tie was geometrically precise, his shirt-front gleamed like porcelain, his teeth flashed, his checks shone, his hair emitted a reticent and manly tang. He had taken almost as long to prepare as the dinner.

'How terribly dangerous!' another girl breathed.

'Oh, it had its moments,' he admitted. 'But mostly it was frightfully boring. Oh, yes,' he said, laughing casually. 'One got used to sleeping on the bridge, living on biscuit and cocoa, the gales, the torpedoes, bombs, mines, and all that. . . . It was simply the Battle of the Atlantic. The convoy had to get through. But the men, you know . . . the lives of every one of them in one's hands. Frightful responsibility.'

'Do tell us some of your experiences,' one of the girls implored, wide-eyed.

He awarded them all a smile. 'I'm sure you wouldn't be interested. . . .'

'Oh, yes, we would!'

'Well, I wasn't in anything terribly spectacular except when we had a go at the *Bismarck*. . . .'

The girls gasped.

'We were the last ship to spot her one afternoon in an Atlantic gale. Almost immediately she opened fire. Rotten luck, first shot hit us right on the bridge. Fortunately I was blown clear, with nothing worse than a broken bone or two. Rest of the crew wiped out—steering wrecked—crew about to panic. But of luck, I recovered consciousness. I struggled aft to the emergency steering gear. "What are you going to do, sir?" the Cox'n asked—he was rattled, poor fellow-- "Why, attack and sink her, of course!" I told him. He

thought I was joking—a broadside from her could have smashed us to iron filings. But I had a plan. Engine-room was intact, thank God, so I worked round to windward and laid down smoke. It went rolling ahead of us in the gale, and I was just going in to let her have it with our torpedoes when the big ships went and finished her off.'

'Golly!' said the girls. Their food was cold and untouched in front of them.

Shawe-Wilson helped himself to another glass of wine, provided by one of the girls. For an instant he saw himself in command of a shattered corvette, instead of Fourth Mate in a tired Pole Star tramp awaiting the quietus of a torpedo.

'I certainly hope you had a rest after that,' an Australian girl said reverently.

'As a matter of fact, the Doc told me to get out of corvettes,' he told her, reaching for the menu. 'So I put in for a transfer. I spent the rest of the war in mine disposal.'

* * *

On Ebbs's table conversation had died: they ate like ten strangers at a lunch counter.

As he silently started his chicken Ebbs realized that his left suspender was unhooked. He cursed Burtweed silently. He was now faced with an overriding problem. If he left the suspender, it would trail after him when he quitted the saloon as noticeably as a ball and chain; but to disappear under the table to fasten it while he still sat under the passengers' judgment was unthinkable.

After several minutes' unhappiness, Ebbs saw a

brilliant compromise. He would lean down stealthily and tuck the liberated elastic into his sock.

He glanced warily round the table. Everyone was eating as if concentrating on a painful duty. He slowly let his left arm slip down his leg and started groping round his shoe. He brushed clumsily against Mrs Porteous's stocking. Immediately the pressure was firmly returned, and she gave him a look signifying that an inviolable relationship had now been established between them.

"You will come and have a liqueur with me after dinner, won't you?" she purred, laying a hand on his arm. "Unless, of course, you'd prefer your rum?"

"I must get up to the bridge," Ebbs muttered in panic. He snatched wildly for conversation. At the far end of the table Annette Porter-Williams and young Mr Dancer had spent the meal in an unconcerned intimate silence. "Enjoying the trip?" Ebbs called heartily.

She looked up in surprise. She was a owl at the age when they all look pretty, and exactly the same.

"Perfectly beastly," she said decisively.

Ebbs tried to smile. "How do you like the ship," he asked.

"Perfectly lovely," she said. Annette had a small reservoir of conversation, and drained it drop by drop.

"Captain, you remind me so much of a dear, dear friend," Mrs Porteous murmured in his ear.

"Gibraltar!" Ebbs cried, being the first thing he could think of. "Yes, Gibraltar!" He rubbed his hands together urgently. "Who's been to Gibraltar?"

'I wish you'd put in there, Captain,' Bill Coke said cheerily. 'I've always wanted to see those monkeys on the Rock.'

'I can tell you something very interesting about the superstition concerning British rule and the apes on the Rock,' Brigadier Broster began immediately. 'It appears that the legend was originally fostered. . . .'

'Aw, get along, Bill!' Gwenny Coke interrupted. 'You can see all the monkeys you want in Taronga Park Zoo.'

'Yeah, but these monkeys are different monkeys, Gwenny.'

'Well, I can't see how any monkey's different from any other monkey.'

'Now see here, Gwenny,' her husband said crossly. 'Since when have you set yourself up as an authority on monkeys?'

'Ever since I married into your family, Bill Coke.'

He jumped to his feet. His chair fell back and crashed into the sweet trolley. 'I'll thank you not to insult my family in front of strangers!' he shouted.

'I suppose you can't take a joke any more?' Gwenny snapped.

'I don't call that much of a joke!'

'And I don't call that much of a sense of humour!'

'I'm going back to the bar—good night!' He banged the table violently, rattling the cutlery.

'And don't come back to the cabin slobbering over me when you're dead drunk!' she screamed.

Willy Boast, who had so far said nothing, cried excitedly, 'That's the way to treat 'em,' and knocked a jug of water into Mrs Lomax's lap. Mrs Lomax screamed; Bill Coke strode noisily through the saloon

doors; the conversation at every table ceased; the band paused discordantly in the middle of a bar.

Ebbs was sitting with his head in his hands.

'Ladies and gentlemen . . .' He stood up dazedly.
'Please excuse . . . please . . .'

He hurried miserably away, at the doorway tripping headlong over his suspender.

EBBS sat alone in his cabin feeling he had been thrown into a tank of icy water and was painfully beginning to thaw. His mess-jacket lay sprawled on the sofa, his tie and collar were scattered on the deck, his shoes were kicked into the corners, and his suspender was still undone.

After a long time he reached for a pencil and sheet of ship's writing paper from his desk. He began drafting his resignation. He would post it at Suez, and at least forestall his certain dismissal at Fremantle. He was a failure. What Sir Angelo had implied, his officers had suspected, and he himself had secretly feared was true. After lumbering so long in floating pantomimons round the rough ocean by-ways of the world, he was as useless for directing the *Chara-maque's* social life as the *Martin Luther's* engines for propelling her. For twenty-five years he had kept his sanity at sea by picturing himself one day presiding over dinner in the first-class saloon of a Pole Star liner. And what had happened? The greatest maritime fiasco since *The Wreck of the Hesperus*.

There was a soft tap at the jalousie, and Burtweed entered with a tray.

'Some tea and sandwiches, sir,' he volunteered. 'You didn't have much to eat in the saloon.'

the time?' Ebbs asked gloomily.

on eleven, sir.'

Ebbs watched him in silence as he set out the crockery.

'Dinner was not much of a success to-night, I fear, Burtweed.'

'I shouldn't let a little thing like that worry you, sir,' he replied with respectfully controlled cheerfulness. 'People act proper queer at sea sometimes.'

'It is hardly a "little thing,"' Ebbs said miserably. 'It worries me considerably. My authority aboard has suffered a severe blow. What do you suppose the passengers will say? What do you imagine the office will think? I shall be ruined, Burtweed, as soon as news of this gets back to London.'

'Why, bless us, sir, they'll have forgotten it to-morrow!' Burtweed smiled on Ebbs like a mother with a bruised child. 'Very short memories at sea, sir. They'll have so much to gossip about in a day or two they won't even give it a thought. Time and time again I've seen it, sir - they're all bosom pals north of Suez, and by the time we reach Sydney they've forgotten the names of the ones what got off at Melbourne. A ship is like Heaven, I always say,' Burtweed continued sunnily. 'The passengers come up the gangway—they might be anyone. They leave us in Australia—they might be going anywhere. In between, they all sort of get a fresh start, sir, to behave like they've always wanted to. That's why they plays up.'

'I hardly feel inclined to show my face in the saloon again,' Ebbs interrupted, as he had not been listening. 'I suppose nothing like this ever happened to Captain Buckle?'

'Oh, much worse, sir!' Burtweed said 'with enthusiasm. 'I remember two Italian singing gentlemen what we was taking out to Melbourne to perform, sir. They both became attracted to the same young lady, and when it got proper hot in the Red Sea they tried to do each other in with their butter-knives at lunch.'

'Open violence at least was avoided,' Ebbs murmured with faint gratitude.

'And don't forget, sir, to-morrow's the Captain's cocktail party.'

Ebbs groaned.

'I shouldn't give up, sir,' Burtweed said, carefully planting his last goad. 'After all, it's just part of the Captain's job, sir, isn't it? Like logging the crew if they're drunk, sir. You may not like it, but you have to take it as it comes. With respect, sir.'

Ebbs sighed. 'In a way you're right, Burtweed. I obviously cannot desert my post in the middle of the voyage, whether it's in the wheelhouse or in the saloon.' He thought for a few moments, looking as if he was deciding to shoot a favourite dog. 'I suppose I can sleep on it,' he declared.

'That's the spirit, sir'

'Anyway, I must go to the bridge and write my night orders.' He wearily began putting on his collar. 'Whatever the state of the ship' social life, her navigation must continue. Then I shall turn in. At least I have the consolation that my troubles of to-day are over.

* • *

Ebbs had a captain's gift of falling asleep immediately but waking at the faintest interruption in the calm rhythm of a ship's night. After dreaming

repeatedly that he was racing down the *Charlemagne's* boat deck stark naked with Lady McWhirrey, he suddenly sat up in bed. There was a noise outside, in his day-cabin. He felt for his watch; it was just after three. He listened again. A knock, short and timid, sounded at his outer door. He scrambled to the deck, reached for his mothly woollen dressing-gown and soap-spattered slippers, switched on his day-cabin light, and opened the door beyond. In the alleyway outside stood Annette Porter-Williams and Mr Dancer, hand in hand and looking sheepish.

'I say,' said Dancer. He laughed nervously. 'I wonder if—that is, can you marry us?'

Lbbs looked at them blankly for some seconds. He pulled a handkerchief from his dressing gown pocket and blew his nose.

'Do I understand that you wish me to perform the—ah, wedding ceremony?' he asked. 'Is it some surgical operation?'

'That's no bit,' Dancer said. 'Straight away.' The couple shot shy glances at each other and giggled.

On 'Come inside,' Lbbs said.

So still hand in hand, they stood in the centre of his cabin.

'But why couldn't you have got married before you came on board?' he asked, puzzled.

'Why, we didn't know each other then.'

'You mean—you are intending on the strength of a few days' acquaintance—'

'Not even a few days, Captain,' Dancer laughed again. He was a thin, handsome young man with pale hair and neat teeth. 'We only really met this evening at dinner,' he explained. 'At your table, you

know. But we got along jolly well, you see, and . . . and . . . do you believe in fate, Captain?"

Ebbs, who was smoothing down his hair, shook his head discouragingly.

'Well, out there on the boat-deck,' Dancer went on, 'with the stars and the moon, you know, and the sea rushing far below, and Annette's hair glittering in the lights. . . .' He was suddenly gripped by the memory of powerful emotion. 'I realized all at once . . . we both realized, that is . . . didn't we, darling?' he gasped, squeezing her hand vigorously.

'Angel one!' she murmured. They went into a robust embrace.

Ebbs had heard all about shipboard romances, but the speed of this one seemed to him more appropriate to the farmyard.

'I'm afraid you find me somewhat unprepared for this situation,' he said, wondering what to do next. 'I have for many years been a confirmed bachelor, and know very little about such things. However, I suppose it's my duty as the ship's Captain to comply with your request. As long as it is perfectly correct and proper, of course.'

They were taking no notice of him, so he reached for the heavy copy of *Company Regulations* standing next to the flag-emblazoned ship's Bible in his bookcase. He opened it hoping the authors had a wide view of the emergencies likely to beset a Captain at sea. Ebbs was a kind-hearted man who pleasurably gave large subscriptions for his shipmates' wedding presents, but at the moment he wanted to go back to bed and thought he had never before seen such a revolting pair of people.

'I'm afraid I can't be much use to you,' he announced flicking over the pages. 'It's nothing more than a popular superstition that Captains can marry couples at sea. Look, it says so here.' He pointed out the paragraph, feeling greatly relieved.

Their faces fell.

'Oh, no, Captain!'

'But how utterly beastly!'

'I say,' Dancer said, animated with a bright idea. 'Couldn't we wake up one of those parson blokes on board? Or all six of them, if it would make any difference?'

'I'm afraid that wouldn't be the slightest use, either, Mr Dancer. Marriages simply aren't allowed to be solemnized aboard merchant ships at sea. I've read the regulation most carefully, I assure you. Some sort of licence would be necessary for the ship. Like the fumigation certificate,' he explained.

They looked like children denied sweets.

'I might possibly be permitted to call the banns at sea,' Ebbs said, thumbing over more pages in the hope of offering them some consolation. 'Perhaps something could then be fixed up in Port Said or Aden--there seems to be plenty of British clergy in both places.'

'But I want to get married to-night!' cried Annette. Then she burst into tears.

'God help us!' Ebbs muttered. He suddenly thought fondly of the *Martin Luther*: there he had been hauled from his bunk almost nightly through some mechanical or navigational fault, but at least it was impossible for his cabin to be invaded by hysterical women at three in the morning.

'But my dear young lady,' Ebbs said patiently. 'It

is only the matter of waiting a couple of days. What on earth do you want to get married to-night for?

'How dare you, sir!' Dancer snapped, to Ebbs's astonishment. 'I'll have you know that Annette is a thoroughly respectable girl!'

'My dear sir, my dear sir!' Ebbs exclaimed, blushing deeply. 'I assure you I didn't mean to imply . . . I mean to think that you . . .' He swallowed. 'I only meant to say that the courtship has been somewhat brief, and a day or so's reflection . . .'

'You do, do you?' Dancer removed his consoling arms from Annette and faced Ebbs squarely. 'You imply, I suppose, Captain, that Annette and I are making a mistake? You mean that to-morrow morning we shall discover we don't love each other? I see. You are telling me, in fact, that the sweetest and most wonderful woman in the world

'No, no, no!' Ebbs cried. 'I assure you I meant nothing of the—'

'I will have you know, Captain,' Dancer continued aggressively, 'that there is not, never has been, and never possibly can be, another woman in the world for me but Annette.' Annette had subsided into snuffles, but at this declaration she began to cry loudly again. 'To suggest that our love is not true, strong, and enduring is an insult to the dearest woman on earth. I realize you are the Captain of this ship, sir, and even as a passenger I must show you some respect. But by God! Anyone else I'd be inclined to give a punch on the nose—'

'Mr Dancer! Have you taken leave of your senses?' Ebbs shouted. 'What is all this nonsense? You come to my cabin in the middle of the night with a most

unreasonable request, to say the least, and I am doing my best to help you——'

'I meant no offence,' Dancer said, soothed by the return of Annette to his damp shirt-front. 'After all,' he went on more tolerantly, 'I suppose if it hadn't been for you, and sitting at your table, and all that, we should never have met at all. Should we, my dearest one? All my future nappiness would have been absolutely lost. It's a breathtaking thought.'

'Quite. Well, you must reconcile yourself to the fact that I cannot unite you in holy matrimony at the moment. You must therefore -ah, possess your souls in patience. Now I should, if you please, like to go back to bed.' Ebbs paused. He remembered for the first time his last interview in London. McWhinney wanted romance, and he was getting it. 'I think I should make some formal announcement to the ship,' he continued more benignly. 'My cocktail party is to-morrow evening, and that seems a highly appropriate occasion. You are both asked, I trust? Good. Then I shall do everything in my power to arrange for the wedding the moment we reach Port Said. And now let me take the opportunity of offering you—perhaps somewhat belatedly—my heartiest congratulations and best wishes.'

The couple, beginning to smile again, stood hand in hand before him.

'No doubt,' Ebbs went on, trying to enter into the spirit of the thing, 'you will require a ring. Possibly they are obtainable at the ship's hairdresser's—they sell all sorts of things.'

'I have one!' Annette said breathlessly. She pulled a ring from her right hand and dropped it on *Company Regulations*, which Ebbs was holding open in front of him.

'Now, Mr Dancer,' Ebbs said, becoming faintly coy. 'I believe you place it on the third finger of the left hand.'

'I say!' Dancer exclaimed. He looked happily at Ebbs and took the ring. 'It's almost a wedding, isn't it? I mean—you, the ring, the book . . . all that's necessary now is for you to give us your blessing.'

Ebbs closed *Company Regulations* with a snap. 'Certainly not, Mr Dancer!' he said severely. 'I will not take responsibility for your actions. Good night!'

8

‘LET us pray,’ said Canon Swingle
 Ebbs reverently lowered his head, and began
 keenly inspecting the rows of passengers under
 his eyebrows.

It was the next morning, a Sunday, and the news had run through the ship like a fire alarm that Ebbs was in a black mood. He had woken into the unsettled climate between the past thunderclouds of yesterday’s dinner and the coming turmoil of the cocktail party, his sleep had been broken into by a pair of amorous idiots; he had cut himself shaving, his breakfast was cold, he had made a foolish mistake calculating the ship’s morning position, and he had found a pile of cigarette-ends behind the flag-locker on the bridge. Ebbs was a mild man, but any one of these occurrences at sea is usually sufficient to turn the delicate balance of a Captain’s liver.

As Ebbs’s only acquaintance with the prayer-book in the past twenty-five years had been on the disposal of his dead shipmates, he had deputed command of the *Charlemagne’s* spiritual navigation to Canon Swingle. The Canon now stood between himself and Shawe-

Wilson at a flag-draped table in the first-class lounge, giving the service the professional polish of his practised monotone. He was a lean, vague man of the type often found desiccating in English cathedrals, and had been stimulated by his surroundings and large captive congregation to decorate his supplications with the rich hand of a Victorian architect.

'Like this so fragile bark which bears us all,' he insisted, 'we uncertainly navigate the currents of this life. We barely miss the perilous headland and rocky cape, we foolishly scrape shoal and sandbank, and we lay helpless in storm and tempest. Fearful for our brittle hull and feeble decks. We are blind to the lighthouse and deaf to the lighthouse bell, unable to steer, searching for the miracle of the joyous harbour. . . .'

This idiot doesn't say much for my navigation, Ebbs thought, folding his arms.

They rose to sing *I am Thine in Peril on the Sea* (Ebbs had vetoed *Waverly* *My God to Thee* as traditionally reserved for the ship disappearing beneath them) while Mutt and Jeff passed round cocktail saucers for the collection with their special Sunday expressions of piety. Church is always well attended by ship's passengers, less from a resort to religion because of the insecure environment than the lack of alternative amusements on Sunday mornings and the impossibility of staying in bed. Ebbs stared over his *Fluent and Modern*, trying to spy out the members of his table. Annette and Dancer had their fingers entwined round a prayer-book, the Cokes now sang like two harmonious angels and Mrs Porteous interrupted her careful expression of sanctity by shooting sharp glances at Shawe-Wilson and himself. Mrs Judd had been asked to play the

piano for the hymns, and Brigadier Broster was standing in the front row, looking disagreeable. The Canon gave an address which lasted for twenty-five minutes, then everyone sang the National Anthem and hurried below to reinforce the glow of righteousness with their morning gin. The ensign was lowered from the *Charlemagne's* stern, the collection was counted and turned over to the Purser roughly correct, and as far as the ship was concerned Sunday had expired.

Replacing their caps, Ebbs and Shawe-Wilson left the lounge for the Square, a space by the first-class saloon ports containing the Purser's office and hairdresser's shop, which at sea became the market-place of ship's life, where notices could be posted, messages collected, girls eyed, and gossip exchanged.

'After my somewhat disturbed night I shall not be holding the customary Captain's Sunday inspection,' Ebbs announced, yawning. 'Instead I shall tour the ship informally by myself during the afternoon.'

'That won't be very popular with the crew, sir,' Shawe-Wilson said at once. 'They don't much like to have the Captain snooping on them.'

'If you will wait to hear the rest of my remarks,' Ebbs said patiently, 'perhaps you will spare me the benefit of your advice on how to command my ship. I wish you to inform all departments of my intentions, for the specific purpose of preventing anyone feeling "snooped on," as you say.'

'Captain Buckle usually left inspection and so forth to me, sir.'

'Captain Buckle, I do not wish to remind you, is no longer with us.'

'Oh, quite, sir. I was only making a suggestion. I

thought at the moment you would prefer to 'concentrate on learning to handle the passengers.'

'Mr Shawe-Wilson——!' Ebbs checked himself and blew his nose. He went on: 'I am perfectly confident of my ability to handle both the ship and the people in her—get that in your head, please, and keep it there.'

'Yes, sir.'

'If it comes to that, what about boat-drill? Under Company Regulations that is your responsibility. Why haven't we had boat-drill? We've been at sea almost a week.'

'The weather's been too rough, sir.'

'That answer, Mr Shawe-Wilson, would sound ridiculous in a court of inquiry. We shall exercise crew and passengers to boat stations at four o'clock.'

'But it's Sunday, sir!'

'I was not aware, Mr Shawe-Wilson, that your religious principles extended so far.'

'We can't have boat-drill on a Sunday, sir. It's the passengers' afternoon whist drive.'

'I don't care if it's the passengers' afternoon washing day. Boat-drill at four.'

'I can tell you that the passengers will be extremely disappointed, sir,' the Chief Officer said.

'Damn it, Mr Shawe-Wilson! The safety of the ship comes first, doesn't it? I am the Captain, aren't I?'

'Yes, sir. . . .'

'Boat-drill then, Mr Shawe-Wilson. At four. And what the devil are you doing here?'

The last remark arrested Jay, the Fourth Officer, like a lasso. He was hurrying down the stairs from the deck in his Sunday uniform, without noticing Ebbs.

'You are aware that Company Regulations forbid junior officers the passengers decks?' Ebbs thundered.

Jay opened his mouth. He stood with his shoulders hunched, gripping the edge of his jacket, rubbing his left ankle with his right heel. He was at the age and rank to be genuinely scared of all Captains.

'Was going to mark the noon position on the passengers' chart, sir,' Jay mumbled. In fact, he had an appointment in the starboard ironing-room after Church with a red-headed girl, achieved after a painfully ingenious passage of notes.

'The time now, Mr Jay, is eleven-fifteen.'

Jay tried to express sound

'Kindly return to your quarters immediately.' Purser, Ebbs went on as Jay scuttled above like a frightened squirrel. 'I should like to see your bar account books, if you please'

'With the greatest of pleasure sir' Prittlewell knew that whenever a Captain woke in a bad mood he wanted to see the bar account books. 'I'll bring them up to your cabin at once'

'That is the general running balance,' Prittlewell said a few minutes later, covering Ebbs's desk with open ledgers. 'You see here, these figures are only corrected against the profit and loss under the imprest system, but the above-the-line items will be set down among the entries made in the following account, because we can strike only a mean balance and —'

'It looks rather complicated,' Ebbs said moodily. 'In the *Luher* we did it all in an exercise book and I kept it in my drawer.'

'Rather a bigger problem here, sir,' Prittlewell said, polishing his monocle.

'Well, I must confess these figures don't mean much to me,' Ebbs admitted. He always felt uncomfortable in the presence of the Purser, who was beginning to remind him of his sister. 'I'd better take your word that everything's correct.'

Prittlewell smiled. 'I assure you, sir, I have hardly robbed a till for years——'

'I certainly had no intention of casting aspersions on your honesty.'

'I'm sure you didn't, sir. Perhaps if you'll sign the page, as required by Company Regulations. . . .'

Ebbs took out his pen.

'And, if you'd like to sign these blank pages too, sir, I shan't have to bother you again till the end of the voyage. Thank you, sir,' he said, as Ebbs blotted the last signature. 'Most obliging of you. We shall meet again to-night then, sir? I am sure your cocktail party will be a great success.'

'Let us hope it will be an improvement on last night's dinner,' Ebbs said. 'I shall do my best to co-operate.'

'I'm sure you will, sir. You are quite the most co-operative Captain I've sailed with for some time. Good morning, sir.'

* * *

During most of the day Ebbs stayed in his cabin. He had decided not to resign until he had played a return match with his passengers at the cocktail party, but he was still too ashamed to face any of them alone. Meanwhile they were settling themselves into the customary pattern of shipboard society. The traditional friendships were forged, at all temperatures from the white heat of passion to the tepid coincidence of

occupying different ends of the same English county, and companions rapidly coalesced into cliques: the gossips settled in their steamer-chairs and began their daily speculation in the busy market of ship's scandal, the athletes strode their calculated miles, and the bridge players held their sovereign corner of the lounge and played steadily on each other's nerves.

Of the *Charlemagne's* complement the most serious set were her band of drinkers—five or six well-seasoned men who travelled often and looked upon ships mainly as liberal dispensaries for duty-free liquors. They had been marshalled from their lonely corners of the smoke-room under the captaincy of Mr Willy Boast, a companionable man whom the long cricketing summers had left permanently patched. At ten in the morning they found their leathery nest beside the smoke-room bar, waiting for the rattle of Scottie's shutter to rise on the dawn of their day. They first exchanged a few words of gently jocular conversation about the state of health and liver, but these were only estimable asides like Prayers in the House of Commons. Mutt and Jeff shortly appeared unsummoned with the usual round of eye-openers, which were followed by sun-uppers, bracers, stiffeners and suorts, until the drinkers were forced to scatter uncertainly to their cabins when the bar shut under ship's regulations at three. Mr Boast then wrapped a wet towel round his head and infuriated his neighbours by rattling a few pages of his next book *Completely Stumped* from his portable typewriter, in the way that he composed his famous cricketing pieces for his newspaper on long licensed afternoons in county pavilions. He continued writing steadily till five, when the bar reopened and his companions

met again to tinkle purposefully into the evening, ending with their final sundowners, night-caps, tiger-frighteners, shark-scarers, and porpoise-chasers as Scottie's shutter guillotined their conviviality at midnight.

At four o'clock that afternoon this lazy ship's routine was cut by the whistle blowing Abandon Ship, and the passengers came sheepishly up the ladders in their life-jackets to boat stations. The only exceptions were Willy Boast, who had locked himself in his cabin, and old Mrs Lomax, who misheard her stewardess's assurances and came screaming on deck, bald, toothless, and in her corsets.

The passengers gathered on the promenade deck in the charge of Shawe-Wilson, who strode among them with his cap sharply over one eye and his thumbs jutting from his jacket pockets: boat-drill was his favourite item of set-going duty.

'Now just listen to me a minute,' he began sternly to the assembly. Respectful silence fell. 'If anything should happen to the ship,' he continued with impressive offhandedness, 'I don't want any panic. You know the form--women and children first. There's no danger if everyone keeps his head. You can take that from me. I saw that clear enough when I was torpedoed. Every time.' He eyed the thoroughly subjected audience austerely. 'Everyone will wait for orders. I don't want any rushing the boats in any circumstances. Remember you're British. Or Australian,' he added quickly. 'Now you——' He picked the prettiest girl in sight. 'Do you know how to put on a life-jacket in five seconds?'

She blushed, and shook her head, as if he had publicly accused her of immorality.

'In that case, I'd better demonstrate. Everyone gather

round me, please—you may smoke if you wish—and I'll show you the way we put on our life-jackets in the Service. Now, young lady, if you will stand here, immediately in front of me, and give me both your hands. . . .'

On the boat-deck above, Brickwood came up the bridge ladder, saluted, and said to Ebbs, 'Boats secure, sir.'

'Very good, Mr Brickwood. All hands seem to know their job. I am perfectly satisfied with the conduct of the exercise.'

'Thank you, sir. Shall I blow Dismiss?'

'We'd better wait for Mr Shawe-Wilson to finish with the passengers, hadn't we?'

'Aye aye, sir.'

Ebbs paced the bridge, thinking about the cocktail party. He had never looked forward to a function with such disrelish since his initiation to the sea, when his fellow-cadets had arranged a cabin celebration at which he was to provide the main entertainment by swallowing a mug of sea-water laced with Epsom salts and treacle while standing on one leg in the nude and singing *Rule Britannia*. He decided he wouldn't make the mistake of last night's dinner by plotting his course in advance: he would treat the affair like a typhoon, and manoeuvre as the moment's peril dictated. And if the guests looked like getting out of hand he could always retire to his bathroom and lock himself in until they had gone.

'Hasn't Mr Shawe-Wilson finished yet?' he asked impatiently ten minutes later.

'He's very thorough, sir,' said Brickwood.

Ebbs spent another five minutes fussing round the

horizon with his glasses, then exclaimed: 'Damnation! What can the fellow be doing? We can't keep the whole ship's company waiting like this. Mr Brickwood!'

'Sir?'

'Kindly take charge up here.'

'Aye aye, sir.'

Ebbs strode to the ladder leading to the promenade deck, glared down, and found Shawe-Wilson demonstrating a reef-knot across the umbilicus of a warmly co-operative blonde

'Mr Shawe-Wilson,' he said later, when the Chief Officer had been brought to the bridge by the tactful summons of a Quartermaster. 'Is it necessary for you to instruct the passengers in boat-drill so—ah, intimately?'

'It seems important to me to show them how to put on a life-jacket, sir,' he said blandly

'Precisely. But you could perhaps have demonstrated as effectively on a Quartermaster?'

'I think I might say, sir, that Sir Angus McWhirrey personally congratulated me on the way I handled the passengers at boat-drill.'

'Mr Shawe-Wilson' said Ebbs deliberately. 'You have the unfortunate knack of bringing me every few hours to the edge of my temper. Isn't there anything you can do about it? I know you look on me as a dithering old fool, but you ought to know by now it's the Chief Officer's job to put up with dithering old fools. Is there any reason why we shouldn't work perfectly harmoniously together?'

Shawe-Wilson stuck out his lower lip.

'Of course there isn't,' Ebbs went on. 'I have difficulties enough in the ship already, as I'm sure you

know only too well. Let us bury the hatchet, please. This evening at my cocktail party seems an eminently suitable occasion. There is no reason why you and I should not get along splendidly.' He blew his nose. 'A fresh start, if you please, Mr Shawc-Wilson. As for now, I will say no more. Kindly signal Dismiss.'

9

THE Captain's cocktail party officially set spinning the *Charl'agne's* social whirl, and the treasured invitations slipped under selected cabin doors had the standing on board of a summons to Buckingham Palace. The party was traditionally held in the Captain's cabin, which caused noticeable conflict between the Pole Star Lane's marine architecture and its social conscience: as every voyage there was an increasing number of people the Line felt obliged to invite, and as a Captain's suite any larger would have given the ship the look of a houseboat, after half an hour the host was generally reminded of the foc's'le of a Liverpool coal-burner on a still night in the tropics, when the firemen had just emerged from stokehold, watch.

At five that evening Burtweed made it plain to Ebbs that he was dispossessed of his quarters, by arriving with four assistant stewards bearing dishes of canapés, *paté de foie gras*, and caviar sandwiches. Ebbs obediently retreated to his night-cabin to change. His feelings about the party by then were mixed: he devoutly wished the next few hours were over, but

after a lifetime of sharply questioned repair bills and niggardly store lists even the flintiest Captain would have found the opportunity of playing lavish host with his Company's money irresistibly attractive.

As he emerged from his shower he found a letter awaiting him.

'From the religious gentleman, sir,' Burtweed explained.

Dear Captain [I blis read], I must ask you to excuse me from your ecclesiastical party to-morrow. I cannot tolerate being in the same room as Br ad a brother. I do not much like being in the same ship with him, but unfortunately there is no alternative. I admit I am only a Canon of the Church of England but I cannot agree that the Brigadier and his staff should use their service any letter. It is not his to let the use of the ship. He spent the afternoon in the same manner in the same place of doctrine. Apparently he is a great deal of course in his own village, where he is not a great deal of course in his own village.

Yours sincerely,

A R A Sangle

PS I much doubt if I can help you. But you do it be possible to meet me at the table for the night? I have invested almost my last penny in the same way as my doctor said I needed a new after-chance.

Ebbs sighed, and stuck the letter behind his mirror. It was consoling to know other people had their troubles as well.

'Welcome, gentlemen, welcome,' he said a little later, appearing in his mess-kit in the day-cabin. 'Very pleased to see you, gentlemen, and very grateful for your encouragement.'

His senior officers, who pillared the responsibility of the party with him, were already standing among the glass and silver savouring their first free drinks. There was Prittlewell and Shawe-Wilson; Earnshawe, the Chief Engineer, a red-faced Yorkshireman with hands like elephants' ears; and the ship's doctor, a charming elderly practitioner who had retired to the unexacting practice of the sea after a lifetime of equally tranquil therapy for the Bengal railways.

'I trust this evening will denote the beginning of a more fruitful comradeship between us,' Ebbs said with more assurance than he felt. 'All ships are the same, gentlemen, but they take time to settle down. They have their stresses and strains—if I may borrow an expression from your department, Mr Earnshawe. But we shall soon be a very happy ship. I certainly hope so. Meanwhile, I fear we have something of a trial ahead of us to-night. I shall certainly need your support—to give me a hand with the ladies, eh, Mr Shawe-Wilson?' Shawe-Wilson winced. 'You've made quite a spread, Purser, quite a spread,' Ebbs continued, surveying the sandwiches benignly. 'What are these little fellows here? By the way, Purser, you'd better shift the Canon again. Put him with those young lady gymnasts—very appetizing sandwich, this, very appetizing, indeed!'

'So they ought to be, sir. They cost the Company about five shillings each.'

'Really? Five shillings? Well, Purser, I am surprised! Who'd have thought you could pay five shillings for a sandwich? What on earth can —'

'Commander and Mrs Barker!' announced Burtweed from the door.

'Good gracious, guests already!' Ebbs exclaimed, springing across the cabin with outstretched hand.

Shawe-Wilson looked at the others. 'Caviar for the —er, Captain,' he murmured.

Commander Barker greeted Ebbs heartily, recognized the cut of his jib, and asked if they had met in the Bombay Yacht Club, the Royal Thames Yacht Club, or the Royal Yacht Squadron. Ebbs muttered that he didn't belong to any clubs and had never been in a yacht, and passed quickly to the next arrival. The guests were already queuing in the alleyway outside, and were admitted under the regulating eye of Burtweed while Ebbs stood at the door distributing the small currency of politeness with progressive generosity. As he had hardly looked further than the passengers who ringed him in the dining saloon, he greeted most of them as strangers, but shortly he began to find old friends.

'Dear Captain' Mrs Porteous, in tight low-cut dress, took his hand warmly. 'How terribly sweet of you to ask me to your perfectly lovely party.'

'I assure you, madam, the pleasure —'

'You have such deep, deep, grey eyes,' she murmured, squeezing his fingers and looking up at him. 'I suppose you're always standing on the bridge searching for things? How tired you must get!'

Across the cabin, Shawe-Wilson raised his eyebrows. Her look, foreign to Ebbs, was expertly translated by himself.

'Yes, indeed, of course,' Ebbs mumbled, looking round for relief. 'Ah, Purser! The Purser here will see to your refreshment,' he continued, handing her on. 'There are jolly nice sandwiches, and so forth. My

dear Mr Boast,' he continued immediately, through the door. 'How very good of you to tear yourself away from your literary labours.'

'Jolly old pals,' said Mr Boast amiably.

The cabin filled, the chattering increased, the officers circulated the silver dishes with practised grace, and the stewards began to sweat into the Martinis. Before long it looked like any other cocktail party: people began shouting at each other, ignoring their partner's conversation, and laughing loudly at their own jokes, while the women began being catty and the men shot hot glances of appraisal at girls across the room.

Shawe-Wilson shortly withdrew from the noisy core of guests and leaned thoughtfully with his pink gin on the bulkhead. The night of the Captain's cocktail party was a critical one for him, for it signalled the start of his amorous activities on board. He was a tidy gallant, who had reserved the first five or six days at sea to assess the applicants for his attentions ever since his maiden voyage in the *Charlemagne*, when he had thoughtlessly grabbed the first girl presenting herself as the ship cleared Dover and had journeyed restlessly to Sydney in her embraces. Now he preferred a more sportive attachment until the ship reached the Red Sea, where the girls lay in rows ripening deliciously in the sun and he could choose a second companion to last until the Australian coast. This time-table was subject to instant cancellation directly a more rewarding target presented itself, for Shawe-Wilson was the sort of man who could never mentally undress a girl without simultaneously valuing her clothes. He had no intention of pacing a bridge for the rest of his life, and had decided to obtain his discharge from the sea by

the first heiress who happened to travel in the *Charlemagne*. Twice he had smelt success: but the first girl's father suddenly went bankrupt and shot himself, and the second, the only daughter of a brewing millionaire, called him Boykins and was as graceless as a combine harvester.

'About the lot, sir,' Burtweed muttered in Ebbs's ear.

Ebbs nodded. No disaster of protocol had yet occurred, and he was beginning to think of himself guardedly as a social success. 'All goes well,' he said hopefully.

'Very decent, sir.'

'I shall circulate among the guests, then. That's the thing to do, I take it.'

He squeezed into the cabin with the intention of passing himself round like an uninvited canapé. He was jostled from group to group, his drink unsipped in his hand, making awkward pleasantries like a clergyman being genial at a pub. But his guests received him respectfully enough and politely kept the conversation to technical questions about the sea. Who did the steering while he was having his lunch? Did he sleep in a hammock? How many times had he been shipwrecked? Do rats really desert a sinking ship? Was it true about sailors having a girl in every port? Was he born in a caul? The men all called him sir and apologized lavishly when they spilt their drinks down his uniform and everyone offered him more politeness than the legal measure he managed to extract from his officers under the Merchant Shipping Acts. Ebbs found it all modestly encouraging.

'My, Captain!' Gwenny said, as the mercurial Cokes

penned him in a corner. 'This is the nicest party we've had since we left Sydney! Isn't it, Bill?'

'I trust the breaches of last night,' Ebbs asked sheepishly, 'are healed?'

They looked at him.

'Just a lover's tiff,' Bill Coke explained, through a mouthful of sandwich. 'Gwenny and me are sort of—well, high spirited. Why, she's the sweetest girl that ever crossed Sydney Bridge, and that's saying something.'

'My, isn't that nice? Do you know what, Captain?' Gwenny giggled. 'This is a so old honeymoon for us.'

'Excellent' said Ebbs, beginning to feel the *Charlemagne's* memories still did take away a swifty as her wake. 'Just what the Company intended.'

'And we reckon you're a pretty good sport, too, Captain.'

Ebbs bowed modestly in recognition of the supreme Australian compliment.

'Though the first time we saw you,' her husband went on, neatly whipping a drink off a passing tray, 'we thought you was a proper Pounny bastard. Didn't we, Gwenny?'

'Too right we did. I said to Bill, "What do you reckon to the Captain?" And he said, "Gwenny, he looks like a sack cow in a suit shirt. Didn't you, Bill?"'

'That's just what I said. Gwenny love.'

'Quite,' Ebbs said.

Then suddenly the fragile raft of confidence on which he floated began to sink beneath his feet.

'In England,' he heard behind him, 'we travel for pleasure. We do not do journeys simply to get to places

in the shortest possible time. We have our motor cars—very large and comfortable motor cars—and our chauffeurs. We English are great travellers. In winter, we visit the south of France, or Madeira, or Malta, or possibly the winter sports. In summer, we tour Scotland, or our West Country, or Wales. It happens that I know a very interesting story about Wales. I—ah, Captain!" Broster continued as the perversity of the party brought Ebbs within six inches of his nose. 'I'd like a word with you.'

'Yes, Brigadier?'

'I don't want to claim any special privileges on board. You know that. I'm just an ordinary passenger like the rest. The fact I own half the Line doesn't make the slightest difference. You understand?'

'Very considerate of you, sir.'

'But it utterly astonishes me that I haven't been asked to serve on the ship's sports committee. I've had particularly wide experience of this sort of thing and I know the ropes. Every other Captain I've sailed with has been after me like a shot. Of course, it's entirely a matter for you, and I should be the last to interfere with your running the ship. But to be overlooked completely I can only describe as a——'

'I shall see to it that your services are made use of 'at the earliest possible moment,' Ebbs said. 'It is kind of you to suggest it,' he added stiffly.

'Another thing. The tap in my cabin goes drip-drip-drip all the blasted night. Haven't had a wink of sleep since leaving Tilbury. And judging from the smell coming out of my ventilator, something must have crawled up there and died. It's not that I'm complaining——'

'I'll have both repaired during dinner.'

'I might as well tell you,' Broster said, fixing Ebbs with a meaningful stare, 'that McWhirrey asked me to keep an eye on you.'

'Really?' Ebbs gave a brave and flabby smile. 'I sincerely trust . . . I sincerely hope . . . I assure you there will be no—ah, no cause, no cause whatever. . . .'

He tried to back away through a pair of guests and found himself jammed between Mrs Porteous and the bulkhead.

'I knew you'd struggle over to me!' she said with delight. 'How perfectly sweet of you, Captain!' As Ebbs caught Broster's eye across her naked shoulder, she lowered her voice. 'Darling,' she whispered. 'Do come and pay me a little visit to-night, won't you? My cabin's A 25. I'll be waiting for you at midnight.'

Ebbs dropped his glass.

She gripped his arm. 'Promise?' she breathed.

'Impossible!' he hissed. 'Preposterous! Good God, woman!'

'But *promise*, darling!'

'Miss Annette Porter-Williams!' boomed Burtweed from the door.

Ebbs gasped.

'Please come, darling!'

'Let me go, let me go!' He tugged his arm away and pushed through the cabin. He arrived breathless at the doorway. 'Miss Porter-Williams—er, Miss, er, my dear,' he greeted her. 'I—ah, how do you do?'

'Lovely party!' she said, smiling round. 'Are we beastly late?'

'Burtweed!' Ebbs called hastily. He forcefully collected himself. 'Silence, if you please.'

'Ladies and gentlemen!' Burtweed shouted, as if hailing the crow's-nest. 'Pray silence for the Captain.'

As the conversation died Ebbs shakily drew from his pocket a ship's postcard, on which he had written in red ink a short dignified speech.

'Ladies and gentlemen,' he began, slipping the card out of sight. **'A Captain has many varied duties in a voyage, some pleasant, some not so pleasant. But this is one of the more pleasant ones. It is very pleasant for me to have the . . . ah, pleasure, that is . . . the engagement, which I now announce, with great pleasure, between Miss Annette Porter-Williams and . . .'** He looked up. Annette was stroking the cheek of a farotthy-haired youth he had never seen before. **"What's this?"** he hissed. **"Where's Dinner?"**

'He was beastly,' she explained.

'You mean . . . you mean . . .' Ebbs pointed anxiously. **'You're engaged to . . .?'**

'The name's Murrey,' the youth said cheerily, holding out his hand. **'Dick Murrey, of Barbine. I popped the question this afternoon right out there on the deck-tennis court. My bet you could have knocked me down with a tin can when little Annette accepted! She's a great kid!'** He explained heartily to the audience. **'A great little kid! And will the old folks be surprised to see what I've brought home!'**

'Lovely, lovely one!' Annette exclaimed, ruffling his hair.

Ebbs held a hand over his eyes. And now he thought, more trouble at dinner.

10

WHEN Ebbs returned to his cabin shortly before midnight he was a modestly contented man. The cocktail party had on the whole been a success. Dinner had followed naturally as a joyous meal at which he was relieved to find himself almost completely ignored. Afterwards he had graced the adult snakes-and-ladders of the smoke-room race meeting, and he had proudly come away ten shillings ahead of the book.

‘I really think I’m getting the hang of these passengers,’ he announced cheerfully to Burtweed, who was gathering handbags, pipes, cigarette-lighters, and divorced car-keys from the baggage with experienced thoroughness. ‘Despite my somewhat disastrous start, from now on let’s hope it’s all going to be plain sailing.’

‘I’m real glad, sir,’ Burtweed said warmly. ‘There’s no one I’d wish success on more than you, sir. As I said to my mates down below, ‘The new Captain’s a real gentleman,’ I said, sir. ‘You can tell that—not a foul word he’s uttered and never been drunk once since we left Tilbury

'Thank you, Burtweed.' Ebbs yawned. 'Now I must go up to the bridge for my night orders. Kindly open the other scuttles—the place still smells like a lady's boudoir.'

'Very good, sir. Good night, sir.'

'Good night to you, Burtweed.'

As Ebbs climbed the ladder to the darkened chart-room abaft the bridge a deep ripple of peace ran through him. The *Charlemagne's* navigational equipment was neat and modern, with an automatic pilot, a shrunken wheel and melodious electric telegraphs; but all ships' bridges retain the bewitching association of brass and teak, blackness and shaded light, tranquillity and unremitting watch, that can entice men away from the land for a lifetime. Here Ebbs felt secure, familiar, and paramount: the clamorous passengers were reduced to the inconsequential squawking of harbour gulls.

He went to the chart spread in a splash of hooded light and ran his finger thoughtfully along the faint pencil line that marked the *Charlemagne's* progress. Then he opened the small green-covered book labelled *Master's Night Orders* that every night represented him as he slept. He formally recorded the ship's position and course, filled a page with minor instruction and exhortation and ended with the benediction 'All Company Regulations to be strictly observed. Signed: W. Ebbs, Master.'

He closed the book and stepped into the black, gently-creaking wheelhouse. He stopped. He sniffed. He sniffed again. On the starboard wing of the bridge he could make out the double-headed shape of Bowles and Jay, the two officers keeping watch. As he looked,

a glow briefly illuminated their faces and a guilty cone of sparks suddenly shot towards the sea.

Ebbs strode through the wheelhouse door. If anything irritated him more than blunt chartroom pencils, it was smoking on watch.

'Mr Jay,' he said sternly through the darkness. 'I will relieve you of the danger of setting fire to your trousers.'

Jay nervously drew his hand from his pocket and threw a lighted cigarette over the side.

'Are you aware,' Ebbs went on, 'that smoking on the bridge is expressly forbidden in Company Regulations? It is also utterly out of keeping with the etiquette of a British ship at sea. I trust I shall never play the martinet, gentlemen, but there are certain proprieties I insist on having observed. From smoking on the bridge it is but a short step to — ah, beer bottles in the chartroom and portoken in the wheelhouse. I will not have it, gentlemen. I will not.' Kindly understand that.'

'Captain Buckle — began Bowles, the Third Officer.

'Mr Bowles, must I tell you again that I am not in the slightest concerned with the conduct of the ship under Captain Buckle? In future, there is to be no smoking on the bridge. By any one and at any time. Do you understand that?'

'Yes, sir,' Bowles said. He reflected sadly that all good skippers were the same, but the cranks were cranky in their own peculiar ways.

'And you, too, Mr Jay, appear to it I hope?'

Jay had not yet grown into his shipmate's sophisticated attitude to angry Captains, and found their

proximity always withdrew the power of speech. He tried to agree heartily, and made a short squeaking noise.

'What did you say?' asked Ebbs.

Jay squeaked again.

'Kindly do not chirp at me. Mr Jay,' Ebbs said crossly. 'This is no laughing matter. You will also remember your position, if you please. We will now say no more about it. I try to treat my officers like gentlemen, but if Company Regulations are persistently to be broken I shall be obliged to—ah, take steps. Carry on please, Mr Bowles.'

'Aye aye, sir.'

Eight bells rang out. Ebbs returned to the chart-room, reopened the Night Order Book, and added to his last sentence, 'partic'larly those concerning smoking on the bridge.' Brickwood then appeared at the head of the ladder to take the middle watch. He was dressed in a pair of green corduroys, a black drill tunic, a Paisley scarf, and snob boots. He nodded a politely cheerful 'Good evening, sir,' and marched through to the wheelhouse filling his pipe.

Ebbs blew his nose.

'Mr Brickwood!'

'Sir?'

'One moment if you please, Mr Brickwood.'

The Second Officer returned to the chartroom.

'You are four minutes late coming on watch,' Ebbs said, with the deliberation of a tolling bell.

Brickwood gave a guilty glance at the chartroom clock. 'So I am, sir! But I don't think the Third Officer—'

'It is not a matter for the Third Officer or anyone

else, Mr Brickwood," Ebbs interrupted. "If Company Regulations say you are to come on the bridge at midnight, at midnight precisely you appear. Furthermore, you appear to be dressed for attending the ship's fancy-dress dance instead of the serious business of taking a watch at sea. What, may I ask, is the reason for your outrageous and extremely unseaman-like appearance?"

Brickwood glanced down at his clothes in surprise. "Oh, this rig, sir," Captain Buckle said the middle-watch keeper could dress for comfort — "

Ebbs suddenly thumped the chart-table in exasperation, bouncing the pair of pencils on to the deck.

"I don't care if you appeared on the bridge under the command of Captain Buckle stark naked!" he roared. "I will not have my officers sloping about as if this were a Grimsby fishing boat. Go below and put on your uniform, Mr Brickwood. If you please, at once!"

"Yes, sir," Brickwood looked startled, as if an old sheep had turned round and bitten him. "Certainly, sir."

Ebbs turned back to the Night Order Book, and added "Also those concerning dress." He then underlined the sentence twice, watched Bowles and Jay initial the page in silence, and disappeared down the ladder to the deck.

Ebbs was shaken. The contentment of his evening had been shattered by his own officers, who were now without doubt abusing him bountifully just out of ear-shot. He was a sensitive man, whose awkward years as a junior officer had left him with an unusual dislike of upbraiding his inferiors, but he sensed equally sharply his duty to the Company of maintaining

discipline. To dissipate his anger he decided to take a turn round the boat-deck before going to his cabin, and as an extra sedative he drew from his inside pocket the cigar Bill Coke had given him in a burst of alcoholic generosity at dinner.

For a while Ebbs leaned with his back on the rail, watching the haze from the funnel which intermittently dimmed the stars and listening to the gentle protest of the water against the sides of the intruding ship. It was a mild night, the boat-deck was deserted, and lit only by a few lights carefully shaded away from the bridge. Ebbs reflected that the *Charlemagne's* passengers made early to bed. He began to stroll casually aft, puffing his cigar and whimsically following the smoke as it hesitated and was snatched away by the breeze. Soon his peace of mind returned, and he began to hum a few bars of some private song.

A giggle, as furtive as a scurrying rat, came from a dark nook in the upper works. Ebbs paused. Straining his eyes into the recess, he caught the flash of a stocking. Immediately he strode down the deck, keeping his gaze well out to sea.

He stopped at the after end of the boat-deck, where he leaned on the rail and pulled firmly at his cigar. A slap—sharp, sudden, and unmistakable—rang from the space between a pair of lifeboats. Ebbs frowned deeply. He continued his walk, but more slowly. A timid glance into the shadowy corner by the after fan-house caught a close unheeding couple; and he found similar pairs between the starboard lifeboats, in the niches round the engine-room hatchways, at the base of the funnel, and tucked under the ladders leading to his own quarters. He suddenly realized that

the boat-deck was alive, like a peaceful summer hay-field with rabbits.

By the time he had returned to the forward end of the decks, Ebbs's discretion had flagged. He made for the bridge ladder with quick and noisy strides, intending to finish his smoke in his cabin. But with one hand on the rail he stopped. From the shadow of the companionway he heard a swift sigh, and he caught the sparkle of a white shirt-front and three bands of official gold braid.

'Umm,' Ebbs said.

He hurried up to the bridge, throwing his cigar scrupulously over the side. Brickwood, dressed in his best uniform with a white cap-cover and stiff collar, saluted smartly as he appeared and began saying cheerfully, 'All Company's Regulations being strictly observed, sir -'

'Yes, yes,' Ebbs said. 'Where's the stand-by Quartermaster?'

'On the monkey island, sir.

'Tell him to present my compliments to the Chief Officer and request him to come to the bridge immediately. He will find him in the starboard boat-deck companionway.'

Shawe-Wilson appeared on the bridge looking furious. He had selected with great care at the party a lanky extroverted girl, the second trombone of the travelling gymnast's band. He was a careful spender, but he had invested in her almost a pound's worth of mixed liquors since dinner, he had succeeded in enticing her to the boat-deck for a stroll; and he had just brought further persuasion to the point of suggesting slipping into his cabin, when this Ebbs offered the

against insult or dragging him away from the arms of the woman he loved, or was confidently preparing to.

'You wanted me for something, sir?' he said stiffly. He had decided to pass off the affair with dignity.

'Mr Brickwood,' Ebbs commanded. 'Kindly go on to the wing of the bridge.'

'Aye aye, sir.'

Ebbs closed the chartroom door. 'Mr Shawe-Wilson,' he began. 'What, may I ask, are you up to?'

'I was taking the night air, sir.'

'Really? You come up here smeared with lipstick and stinking of gin and cheap scent —

'Sir!'

'—looking as if you've just rolled out of a whore's bedroom —'

'I must ask you, sir, to moderate

'Moderate he damned!' Ebbs struck the chartroom table again, alarming Brickwood, who was just beyond the door. 'I take a walk round the deck before I turn in, and what do I see? Why the place is like Grant Road, Bombay! I've never heard of such things.'

'The morals of the passengers are no concern of ours, sir.'

'But the morals of the Chief Officer are very much a concern of mine. You realize, Mr Shawe-Wilson, that you have been breaking the most serious of the Company's Regulations? Do you? Do you, sir?'

Shawe-Wilson shrugged his shoulders. 'The Chief Officer has certain social obligations. . .

'Social obligations! Good God!'

'Under Captain Buckle——'

'I don't—' Ebbes checked himself. He paused, his fist already over the chart table. 'I am disappointed, Mr Shawe-Wilson,' he went on quietly. 'I was hoping that you and I might make a fresh start this evening. I shall have to think again, that's all. It saddens me considerably. Now it is very late, and I have had an extremely trying day. I have no wish to turn over such delicate subjects at this moment. Tempers and judgments become unreliable—things are said which might be very regrettable. I should therefore be obliged if you would retire. Alone, please.'

'As you wish, sir,' Shawe-Wilson said, as unritatingly as possible.

'And I shall require you to come to my cabin at nine in the morning.'

'Nine? All right, sir.'

'Good night, Mr Shawe-Wilson. I bid you formally. The Chief Officer may not reply.'

Ebbes stood for some time alone in the chartroom. He had no intention of accepting deference from anyone. But as it was impossible to expect of an officer until the ship returned to London, and he wished whole-heartedly that Shawe-Wilson would meet with some reasonably disabling accident. When at last he followed the Chief Officer slowly down the ladder to his own cabin, his steps heavy with the due official authority. He switched on the light and shut the door. He sniffed disagreeably the perfume of the duty still hung in the air. He slipped off his heavy mess jacket with relief—it was always good to 'suspend' the obligations of command by sleep. On an afterthought, he crossed to the cocktail cabinet and poured himself a small whisky and soda, which he took through to his night-

cabin. He turned on the light to find Mrs Porteous lying on his bed.

'Lord Almighty!' Ebbs said.

She giggled. 'I thought you were never coming, Captain dear.'

Ebbs put the glass down firmly on his dressing-table.

'My dear good woman,' he said. 'I really must request you to leave this cabin immediately.'

'Now, now, darling!' She pouted in playful reproach. 'That isn't the way to welcome a girl, is it?'

'Mrs Porteous——'

'Elsbeth, dear,' she breathed.

'You will leave at once!'

'I won't, you know.' She curled up on the bed, offering him a long length of leg. 'What are you going to do? Call out the guard?'

'I——' Ebbs stopped. He wondered what the devil he would do.

She laughed. 'Give me a light, sweetie.'

Ebbs blew his nose urgently. With professional quickness of thought in emergency he decided that tact was the only lever likely to ease her off his bed. He obediently picked up a matchbox from the dressing-table, and struck a light. She held his wrist tightly as he lit her cigarette, and asked, 'How about a little drink?'

'Haven't you had enough already?'

She looked at him coyly. 'It's my birthday.'

'Of course you can have a drink,' Ebbs said, with a flash of cunning. 'They're all in the day-cabin.'

'Luring the cat with a saucer of milk?' She laughed again. 'Bring one in *here*, darling. It's ever so much *nicer*.'

Ebbs exploded in a flash of irritation. 'But damn it——!'

'Stush!' She put her finger to her lips. 'Aren't you noisy, darling. You don't want everyone on board to hear you, such? Now just get me a little drink like the sweet angel you are. Then I'll go away.'

'You really will?'

'Of course I will, darling.'

'You can buy mine if you like.' He gave her the glass, and she patted the bed over.

'Come and sit down and we'll have a little chat. Come on, darling,' she insisted. 'I'll go in a minute.'

Ebbs sat down on the bed like a man getting into an over-hot bath.

'Aren't you shy? I should say. Haven't you ever had any girl friend?'

'I must ask you to remember my position, madam,' Ebbs began carefully. He had suddenly decided on an appeal of reason to the woman. 'I am the Captain of this ship, and expected to set a good example to my officers — also I am liable to my passengers. The slightest breath of scandal could be disastrous to my authority. And possibly you know that is why I really must ask you not to have any kindness and consideration at all to leave my cabin at the earliest possible moment.'

'What's that?' she asked, picking up a brass cup clipped over the sink.

'For God's sake, put the damn thing down!' Ebbs threw out his arm to grab it and spill the whisky. The *Charlemagne*, like other electrified vessels, still preserved on the bridge reliable apparatus like a telescope and the Captain's voice-pipe. Miss Porteous unstoppered the

short tube leading to the wheelhouse above, and gave a short blast on its commanding whistle.

'Put it down!' Ebbs hissed. He tried to clap his hand over it, but she giggled and held it against the top of her dress. As she grasped the pipe she suddenly let go and powerfully embraced him instead. He sealed the mouthpiece with his damp palm, and she began spraying his face with uninhibited kisses.

'Let me go!' Ebbs muttered in terror. 'For God's sake, let me go!' Already he had heard the hasty clatter on the bridge ladder, a knock came immediately at his day-cabin door.

'Don't make a sound!' he commanded fiercely. He closed the entrance door, remembered to wipe his face with a handkerchief, and then the door beyond. Brickwood, suddenly aware that now we have a stiff salute.

'Is anything wrong, sir?'.

'Er no, Mr Brickwood. Nothing, . . . nothing's wrong at all.'

'I thought I collected on the wrong page, sir?'

'Some bad feeling, Mr Brickwood. I breathelessly "Called out in the fog" you know. Well-known failing of mine, you can see. Sorry I disturbed the bridge.'

'You were a help, sir.' Brickwood looked puzzled. Ebbs glanced down at his stiff shirt-front and trousers.

'Dressed off on my part.' I suppose. I ring day, Thank you, Mr Brickwood. Very pleased to see you keeping such a good watch.'

Brickwood saluted again. 'Good night, sir.'

'Good night, Mr Brickwood.'

Ebbs shut the door and leaned for a second against the bulkhead inside. Then he sprang for the inner door determinedly.

'Mrs Porteous . . .!' he began forcefully. He stopped. She had taken her dress off.

'What are you doing?' he demanded. 'Are you mad? Are you determined to ruin me? Have you no sense of shame? Can't you go elsewhere?'

'Shhhhhh!' she said. 'Or I'll scream through this.'

'Leave that voice-pipe alone, I pray you!' Ebbs cried fervently.

'Come and sit down beside me then, sweetie. We haven't finished our little chat have we?'

'Have you no thought for your husband?' said Ebbs feebly.

'Of course, darling! He's terribly sweet. You'll love him when I introduce you to him.'

Ebbs shuddered.

'Now, darling, why don't you relax a little?' A plump naked man considered him.

'This is impossible!' he cried. 'Absolutely impossible! I give you exactly two minutes to leave this room.'

'But you can't turn a subject's back on her dress on, can you sweet?'

'If *if* you dress on.

'No, sweetie, she's not fully here I am - and here I stay.'

'You are not, my dear, you are not!'

'Don't make me do this, please.'

'Go!' he pointed to the door.

She began taking off her brassiere.

Ebbs arrived breathless on the bridge. He immediately grabbed the top of the voice-pipe.

'Anything 'wrong, sir?' Brickwood asked, saluting brilliantly and trying to look unconcerned.

'I thought I'd come up for a little fresh air, Mr Brickwood.'

'Oh, I see, sir.'

'Please carry on with your watch. Pay no attention to me at all.'

'Very good, sir. But aren't you a little cold, sir? You're hardly—fully dressed, sir.'

'I was rather hot in my mess-jacket. Touch of the fever, possibly. I'll see the Doctor in the morning.'

'I'm sorry, sir. You certainly don't look very well, sir.'

'Thank you, Mr Brickwood. If you wish you may remove your own jacket. The Regulation—possibly relaxed—concerning the watch. I'll stay here.'

'Very good, sir.'

As Brickwood turned away the last lines of *I Can't Get Any More of the Ice* came up the voice-pipe. Ebbs stuck his chin out.

'I bet you're going in.' Brickwood's eyebrows were raised to the peaks.

'Nothing, Mr Brickwood. I was merely singing to myself.'

'Yes, sir.'

Brickwood went out to the wing of the bridge and leaned thoughtfully over the turboard light. He wondered if he should call out the Doctor straight away and have Ebbs overpowered by the Quatermasters before he could do serious harm, or wait until daylight when his chances of escaping to terrorize the ship would be lessened. He edged towards a marine-spike by the rail and thoughtfully slipped it up his sleeve. Ebbs was

standing in the wheelhouse with an appearance of deep misery, staring at the top of the voice-pipe as if he expected a dangerous snake to crawl out. He was still there when the watch changed at four. At six he made his way nervously to his cabin, and to his immeasurable relief found that Mrs Porteous had gone.

11

SHAWE-WILSON came to Ebbs's cabin the next morning prepared to fight for his job. With daylight he saw bitterly that Ebbs was right. Although Captain Buckle had smiled at cautious wenching by his officers, a report that the Chief Officer had been caught making love to the Company's passengers on the boat-deck would stand out ruinously from the papers on McWhirrey's desk. He had prepared his excuses carefully while shaving: first, he thought it was allowed; secondly, he was doing his duty by encouraging the social life of the ship; thirdly, the poor girl was lonely; fourthly, he loved her; fifthly, the lapse would never occur again, if he had the continued honour of serving under Ebbs's command; lastly, it wasn't him at all, but the Second Engineer.

He knocked on Ebbs's door, saluted, slipped his cap smartly under his arm, and entered.

Ebbs looked up. He was red-eyed and pale, sitting bleakly over the unaccustomed remains of his breakfast.

'You sent for me, sir.'

'Did I?'

'Yes, sir.' Shawe-Wilson looked surprised. 'Last night. On the bridge.'

Ebbs gazed sorrowfully at the toast-rack. 'I should have expected from you, Mr Shawe-Wilson,' he said with more admiration than censure, 'a little greater discretion. Good morning.'

Shawe-Wilson stared at him.

'That is all,' Ebbs said, waving him away.

'Yes, sir. Thank you, sir. Good morning, sir.' He replaced his cup, saluted politely and stumbled from the cabin.

Outside, he lit a cigarette. He had knocked on the door stealing his dinner and burst out upon instant dismissal and had treated him less severely than if he had lost the chance of a further ablutioned the log book. He found it in the stowaway. As he lit he could hardly do more than mutter to himself he wondered what he had done. He could not change his mind.

Brickwood's head appeared round his cabin door.

'Chief?' he asked. 'Have you seen the Old Man?'

'I've just been in his cabin now.'

'Is he found?' the other asked. Brickwood tapped his forehead. 'He's a little bit.''

'Oh, I know that,' said the other, said absently. He paced thoughtfully toward his own cabin, his mind beginning to run on rumbling paths. But first he had to restore his self-esteem, so he went to order the Quartermaster to clean out the hold-overs.

Ebbs continued to sit motionless over his dead breakfast, wondering what he had done wrong in the ship. He ardently hoped the dawn had been sufficiently tinged with shame to silence Mrs Porteous, if he could

now persuade Brickwood that he had been in the grip of some spasmodic fever the recent irregularities in his cabin might stay unsuspected. For a moment he considered sending for the ship's Doctor to fortify his story with the rumour of a consultation, or even turning in and falsifying a roaring temperature under the bathroom tap.

He looked up. Burtweed was standing beside him with a tray.

'Yes, Burtweed' he said disinterestedly.

'I beg your pardon, sir. But if you would kindly tell me the name of the lady who owns the bracelet, I could ship it back in her cabin.'

Ebbs glanced at the thick gold clasp bracelet in the middle of the tray.

'How on earth could I know?' he asked peevishly. 'Put it with the other bracelets left over from the party. The owner will no doubt come and claim it soon enough.'

Burtweed coughed. 'Pardon, sir. I discovered this one in your night cabinet.'

Ebbs looked helplessly at the tray moved in there, Burtweed?

'Possibly, sir.'

Ebbs saw on the tray his whisky glass thickly bitten with lip-tick, and the casing, red-stained stub of a cigarette.

'With great respect, sir,' Burtweed went on, 'it might be more discreet for me to return this one personally.'

Ebbs stood up. He opened his cabin door, looked outside, carefully closed it, and began striding up and down with his hands behind his back.

'Burtweed,' he said resolutely, 'you have been Tiger to several Captains. . . .'

'Not one of which I've regretted, sir.'

'Quite. You have no doubt observed enough to appreciate the difficulties that beset them. I feel^e entitled, therefore, to take a somewhat unusual course. I am going to confide in you, Burtweed. It won't go any further?' he asked in sudden alarm.

'Oh, no, sir' Burtweed was shocked. 'Across my heart, sir,' he added, slapping his left chest heartily.

'Good. Well, you are perfectly correct. There was a woman in my cabin last night.'

'Congratulations, sir.'

'It is not a cause for celebration, Burtweed. The visitor came unasked and left—ah, unattended.'

'I see, sir.'

'Does it mean I shall be dealt with increasing warmth, 'that I am to be the subject of every listening woman on board? I, really, of course, whose very job I depend on keeping my reputation above reproach? Does every woman who wants a bedfell^o want a tale for the Captain? Don't they ever have a go at the Chief Engineer?'

'Bless us, yes, sir' Burtweed said. 'It's always the Captain. He's the prize pipin' of the sea, if you'll excuse the term.'

'But isn't there anything I can do about it? Why, it's ludicrous! How can I be expected to discipline my officers if they think I lead the life of a—libertine?'

'Captain Burtweed, sir, set great store by his woodwork. He said no woman could get romantic in the same room as a lathe.'

There was 'silence, as Ebbs sat down and stared anxiously through the porthole.

'Might I ask, sir,' Burtweed said, 'if you are blessed with a good woman and little ones?'

'No, Burtweed, I am not.'

'Nor I, sir. But such might offer you some protection.'

'Burtweed, I can hardly marry and raise a family in a single voyage,' Ebbs said crossly.

'I don't mean in the flesh, sir,' Burtweed explained. 'If you'll pardon the expression. There's a good many of the lads down below who invent the circumstances, sir. Very much for them playing about with the girls on the coast. Why, half the ship is putten hung to the Aussie girls they're married to keep 'em off, and the other half is pretending they ain't to egg 'em on.'

Ebbs grunted.

Burtweed smiled beneath his white jacket. 'With great respect, sir, I've a photograph of my niece in South Africa and her two companions. If you like, sir, you can have a look of it till the end of the voyage. You could stick it on your dressing-table to keep the lads off, as it were.'

He handed Ebbs a credit and degraded photograph. The Burtweed women-photos had an odd appearance, though their eyes seemed near their ears than to each other. The picture was in colour, bringing out bravely the blonde hair and blue dress of the mother and giving on a child the look of a blue baby and the other of a young blond scarlet fever.

Ebbs laid the card against his boilerwork pipe-rack. 'I appreciate your kindness, Burtweed,' he said. 'I only trust it will prove a powerful enough deterrent. In any case I shall in future keep my cabin locked in

the evenings. Now please remove that filchery from my sight. You can return it to Cabin A25. I may trust you to do so without attracting attention?"

"Not a mortal soul, sir," Burtweed assured him gravely. "You'd be surprised at some of the things I've had to return for Captains in my time."

And now, said Lbbs to himself. I shall have to start steeling myself for lunch.

But Mrs Porteous had the good grace to develop a headache.

THE *Chacabuco* began to approach the hot
 Egyptian shore about Midday near at Suez
 and immediately many small boats and ships
 scattering forth to meet the traffic obliged
 Ebbs to take possession of the narrow beach,
 and he was intended to be driven away
 from his possession and to be vexed by the Portous.
 He appeared on deck with two muffers,
 demanded that all the boats and small vessels
 should be put under command and chewed
 formalin in the presence of the officers that he
 was recovering himself and would not be taken

The following afternoon the ship was dispatched into the grey city water between the long thin arms of the Suez breakwaters. Her bows fell with stately splashes into the Canal, launches reached at her ropes, and she was moored between a pair of buoys at the tail of a long queue of ships. Poor Su! swept away to starboard, equally undisturbably historical and fabulous, the grating lane between East and West durably polished up by Kipling. When McWhirry's steamers had first shuttled sahibs and soldiers between Plymouth

and Bombay in the reassuring leathery gloom of good London clubs, a Pole Star ship with blackened hatches at the coaling berth was as much a part of the Port Said scene as the sand and newly risen minarets. Here the chilly old gentlemen in topcoats who had miserably sipped their Bovril on the rainy Channel decks strode majestically in their accustomed whites and called imperiously for beer, eggs, and the social divisions of British India stood out like the ship's busywork in the intensifying sun. When the *Chelmon* had sailed sluggishly before the starboard side lights pointing the way to India and sighted the arcades of the Moorish Court in Hous, her passengers gathered on deck as excitedly as their Victorian predecessors for their first glimpse of the East. They strained their eyes across the town to wait for the herald call of Islam, a boy with a white turban on a high wall by the Simiti Avenue. As the ship approached the writing grew larger and bolder, the readable *Coca-Cola* it said.

Ebbs left the bridge at noon, the workings were secure, and he found the deck ready for the thickly covered with envelopes. He found each opened the one from McWhirry.

Dear Captain, it said.

Do I have to read your letter to the judges of the undersigned court? I like to see the witnesses. I will stress it up if it is not for a reading Company Regulations. Please do not let the company forbids interviews with me. I hope to see the action consent of the Company. The messengers present there can occur. As you seem determined to thrust your new command on the

public eye, I will remind you of the conditions under which you hold it.

Yours, etc.

Angus McWhirrey

Ebbs scratched his head in bewilderment. Interviews with newspaper reporters? He was old-fashioned enough for a journalist to affect him like a pin in a live winkle. In a daze, he opened the next letter, from his sister.

Dear Billy (she said)

So you're famous at last! Mr Trouncer next door showed me the cutting from the paper by Willy Boast. It's called 'England's Other Captain by Radio.' He writes all about that awful gale you were lucky to survive, and how you took the ship through without turning a hair (he says a Bradman facing elemental howlers). I should think Sir Angus would be very pleased to see that! He also puts a lot about dinner at your table, and says you are a nautical diplomat and witty. I can't get that red stain off your whites, it must be fruit juice. You must be careful at meals, you always were a messy eater. Wrap up well at night, it is very treacherous and you have a weak chest. Don't forget to take your opening medicine on Fridays.

Your loving sister,

Maria

With a sigh, Ebbs let the two letters flutter on to his desk. This was too much even for anger. After a week's struggle against bullies, bickerers, importunate adolescents, and mature nymphomaniacs, his ruin had been completed by an oaf who had been conscious only

of the opening and shutting of the ship's bar since leaving London.

'Hallo, hallo, hallo!' came a hearty voice from the cabin door. Ebbs looked up slowly. It was Berris, the Company's Port Said agent, a cheerful Londoner whom he had detested for several years. 'Well, if it isn't old Ebbs, eh?' the man went on, throwing his hat on the sofa. 'And what a change of scenery, if I may say so! When I got the cable from London you could have knocked me for six—I bet old Ebbs is kicking himself for taking it on, I said. Why, he's far too old a dog to learn new tricks, I said. Eh?' He poked Ebbs in the ribs. 'How do you like your floating gin-palace?'

'All ships are the same,' said Ebbs. But the certainty had been crushed from his voice.

'Mind if I help myself to a peg? This is a change from the old bottle in the boot locker, I will say.' He poured himself half a tumbler of whisky. 'The *Luther*'ll be through here in a couple of weeks—how shall I tell your old crew you're getting on?'

'If I know my old crew,' Ebbs said gloomily, turning to the rest of his mail, 'they will have already decided how I am getting on.'

'I said to the wife,' the Agent continued, settling with his drink on a corner of the desk. "'I bet old Ebbs finds out a thing or two.' I was joking, mind. I said, "I can just see him now, sitting there at dinner, all dressed up like a little flogs' breakfast and looking like when one of the old *Luther's* plates had sprung again." Didn't we laugh?' He roared for some moments at the recollection. "'I bet that he tried to tell them a funny story," I said.' He wiped his eyes. "'And I bet—I bet it flops!"' He put down his glass and held

his sides. 'We were only having a bit of fun, mind. "And I reckon he'll have a hell of a time with half the women on board after him," I said. Gawd! We laughed for hours! But the funniest thing of the lot——'

'Yes, Mr Brickwood' Ebbs interrupted

'A passenger is creating a disturbance by the accommodation ladder, sir'

'A passenger? Which one?'

'Brigadier Broster, sir. He doesn't see why he shouldn't be allowed ashore.'

'Tell him cholera is raging,' Ebbs said. 'Also that the Egyptians have declared war. Now Mr. Burns, we shall attend exclusively to the business of the ship.'

The *Charlemagne's* passengers, kept on board because she was passing only a few hours before moving down the Canal in the evening, were soon tired of their new surroundings like camp children at the Zoo. They wandered uncertainly round the deck, trying to recapture their mid-ocean enthusiasm for quoits and shuffle-board, became increasingly bad-tempered, and finally leaned on the railings, gazing, bored, with the swarming bum-ba-a-men, a patience as extravagant as playing on fruit-machines.

The only contented soul on board was Buttweed. The *Charlemagne's* environment never troubled him. As he rarely went ashore and it was always hot down below, it made no difference to the Tiger whether she lay in London, Port Sud, or Sydney. In the cheerless cabin at water level which he shared with five other stewards he found peace. At sea, he always held himself ready to jump to the Captain's attendance, but in port he suspended his service for a quiet hour to

enjoy the only dissipation of his life. He took off his white jacket and his sharply-creased serge trousers, and hung them carefully on a coat-hanger above his bunk. This left him in the woollen combinations he wore conscientiously in cool latitudes to seal in the health and sunshine of the tropics. From a marbled brown tin trunk below his bunk he drew a large enamel basin, which he took to the steward's messroom and filled with steaming water. Back in his cabin he carefully removed his shoes and socks, drew a wax packet of ironing salts from his trunk, tipped the lot into the water, and rapturously bathed his feet. Purified, suffered hardly from the feet, and at sea was, of course, content to rub them with a green oil sold only by a bubble in Dock Street, and daily buttressed his heels with a dab of goat tallow. But only in port when the Channel's moods were more predictable and the mechanical foot bathman in port did he allow himself the extreme sensation that he anticipated across the ocean. To guard against the more usual shore-going pleasure of his shipmate.

It was soon dawn, and the rotation Canal searchlight was hoisted to the tower, manned by a crew of undenotable natives. Shortly afterwards the *Charlemagne* got under way in a procession of tankers balanced on the water like childlike ducks, sailing empty to Berberne. Kuwait. Ellis supervised the wheelhouse to the Canal Company's pilot, a Frenchman who kept a constant stream of door smoking *Gitanes* and uttering nothing, all night except his helm orders and demands for hot coffee. At daybreak the ship found herself still in view of the unlimited banks of greyish sand, and the passengers were already up and scattered thinly on the decks as the convoy

debouched abruptly between the bright houses of Port Taugiq into the sea. The Pole Star Company expected no delay: pilot, searchlight, and shore gang were dropped into breathless launches hurrying against the *Charlemagne's* flanks, and immediately Ebbs ordered the engine-room telegraphs to ring Full Ahead. Then he inspected the bridge thermometer and announced:

'Going to be a scorcher to-day, Mr Brickwood.'

'I wouldn't be surprised, sir.'

'We shall have rig of the day all white, then. Kindly present my compliments to Mr Shawe-Wilson and tell him to see that all heads of departments are informed before breakfast.'

'Aye aye, sir.'

'Let us hope,' Ebbs said, gazing anxiously aft along the freshly-swabbed passenger decks, 'that the brighter sunshine promises a brighter voyage.'

Within an hour the ship's company appeared in their stiff unsweated white uniforms, and the passengers began to fumble for their sun-glasses and peel away the last of their European coverings. Swiftly drawing away from her companions in the convoy, with the bleak African cliffs on one side and the faint Biblical cone of Sinai on the other, the *Charlemagne* bit into the fervid Red Sea and Ebbs's troubles really began.

IN a patch of shade at the after end of the boat deck Annette sat with her latest fiancé, a thin sad young man in spectacles going out to lecture in Botany at Sydney University. They occupied a pair of hot steamer chairs, and each sipped a John Collins which was being rapidly diluted by the melting ice. Annette wore a smart red swimsuit, and he only an old pair of khaki shorts rolled up his thighs. Their skins were scarlet, and as fragile as the scales of freshly-boiled salmon.

'This *heat!*' Annette groaned.

'The famous Red Sea,' he said.

'But I never thought it would be so beastly hot *as this!* If there isn't a breeze soon I'll go *mad*. Stark-staring raving.'

'People go mad in these latitudes pretty often,' he told her thoughtfully. 'It's renowned for it.'

On the deck below a dozen couples splashed in the captive square of water in the swimming-pool. Beyond, the wake frothed away into the empty blue sea, which ran towards the unbroken sky to seal the ship in a steamy envelope.

'How long till lunch?' pouted Annette.

Looking at his watch was the effort of shifting a grand piano. 'Half an hour.'

'I never thought meals could be so beastly important. It's like being ill in bed.'

As he said nothing, she yawned. 'How bored I am! Can't we have another drink?'

He raised his sun glasses briefly. 'Can't see the deck steward.'

They both fell silent, hypnotized by the heat.

'Talk to me,' she demanded.

With a sigh he looked round for a subject and picked up one of the Pole Star Time books that were distributed thickly through the ship. 'Your ticket is a token for sunbath and service,' he read aloud. '"Three weeks of luxury and a bit more of memories! The radiance of a tropical morning at a street you through your path when you awaken. The sun caresses you with a ray of luxurious idleness. At night, the soft light of the tropical moon and the gentle pitter-patter of the waves lull you to sleep on the deep. . . ."' He turned to a drop on the deck and groaned.

'I wish I'd come before,' she said.

'So do I.'

'How long will it be till lunch?'

'Twenty-five minutes.'

She tucked the last specks of ice round her glass. 'How beastly!'

'Don't look up,' he said urgently. 'Here comes the Captain.'

'Oh, gosh! If he starts being sociable I shall go mad.'

'Let's pretend we're asleep.'

'Look at his knees,' she whispered. 'Men like that shouldn't be allowed to wear shorts.'

It was Ebbs's social half-hour. When the ship had left Suez he saw it was clearly his duty to make wider acquaintance with his passengers and had asked Burtweird's advice how to set about it. 'One can hardly intrude into private conversations,' he explained. 'But otherwise they seem to take very little notice of me. Why,' he went on indignantly, 'I stood by the swimming bath for twenty minutes this morning and my only acknowledgment was a mere splashing from one of these vulgar creatures. I can't believe on purpose.' . . .

'If I may be so bold,' he ventured suddenly. 'You should make a few approaches to Mr. Pike, the steward, with the hope of pleasing him.'

'You think that is sensible.'

'Oh, yes, if you can see a way of you're coming then, and don't waste your time with the misbehaving creature. You must do this on Sunday or ruin the reputation of the ship.'

'I see,' he said doubtfully. Captain Buckle was sociable but not friendly.

'Bless us, yes, at four days past half-past twelve regular half-day. Give us a bit. P. Weid, I'm off to butter up the blood-hounds what pays my rent.' With repetition.

There he it each minute punctually Ebbs stepped from his cabin and found the room deck with the steely jovianity of an old friend. But he found his approach had the effect of a deck chair attendant on a promenade: the passengers either scuttled away,

buried their heads in their books like *estriches*, or instantly sank into a deep sleep.

Continuing hopefully round the deck past Annette, Ebbs came upon Canon Swingle, sitting in correct and decent linen reading a book.

'Well, Canon!' he said cheerfully. 'Not so cold to-day, eh?'

The Canon thought deeply, and after a while said, 'No. Not so cold to-day, Captain.'

Ebbs glanced towards the glassy water. 'Rough sea,' he ventured.

'After several seconds' careful search to the horizon the Canon declared: 'Mercifully calm.'

'Well,' Ebbs said. He saluted. 'Well,' he said again.

Canon Swingle nodded, and returned to the place he was keeping with his finger on the page.

The next target for his politeness was Mrs Lomax, round the corner of the ship's upper-works.

'Good morning, madam: Enjoying the balmy breezes of the sea?'

A look of intense concern came on her face, and she began fumbling with her hearing-aid.

'Just a minute, Captain,' she said nervously.

'Don't worry, don't worry!' Ebbs shouted. 'I merely enquired if you were enjoying the balmy breezes of the sea?'

'What's that, Captain?' she asked. She imagined he was telling her to swim for her life.

'I merely said, "Are you enjoying the balmy breezes of the sea?"' Ebbs roared. Two girls, apparently in coma in neighbouring deck-chairs, broke into sniggers.

'Oh, the balmy breezes? Yes, yes!' Mrs Lomax said.

in relief, as she found the switch. 'Oh, yes, very much, thank you, Captain.'

'And how are you to-day?' Ebbs continued, so that most of the deck could hear.

'Very poorly. Very poorly indeed.'

'But you look very well, madam' he shouted encouragingly.

'My looks belie me. They always have. I've been poorly for years. For years and years.' She sighed. 'Now I have nothing to look forward to except to be reunited with my dear husband.'

'Yes,' Ebbs roared. 'He will be waiting with a bunch of flowers on the quay at Fremantle, I'll be bound!'

'He has been dead for several years,' she said and loudly burst into tears.

Ebbs stumbled backwards in embarrassment, tripped against the foot of a *chaise-longue*, knocked over a pile of ice-cream plates, and hid himself behind the fan-house.

'Captain!' boomed a voice immediately behind him. He shut his eyes.

'I'd like a few words with you, Captain.'

Broster was sitting at ease in a steamer-chair, in a pair of white ducks, a yachting cap, an M.C.C. tie, and a pair of fearsome sun-glasses. At his side were conveniently arranged a glass of iced lager, several old copies of the *Financial Times*, a box of cigars, a bottle of bicarbonate, a pair of binoculars in case of passing ships, a fly swat, a pile of detective stories, and a small private handbell for summoning the deck steward.

'I must get up to the bridge——'

'I won't keep you a minute. I am explaining to

Commander Barker here what to do with the Royal Navy.'

'Got to go and write some letters,' Commander Barker announced, slipping off his chair and disappearing down a handy companionway.

'My breakfast egg,' Brigadier Broster declared, as if issuing a challenge, 'was cold this morning. I wouldn't complain in the ordinary way—I'm not the complaining type. I'm just an ordinary fare-paying passenger. But it was cold yesterday morning. And the morning before. And to-morrow no doubt it will be cold as well.'

'I'll speak to the Purser about it.'

'Furthermore, there's some infernal thing that goes drum-drum-drum all night in my cabin. Don't know what it is, but get it fixed. It may interest you to know that I haven't had my eyes shut more than half an hour since I left home.'

'I'll see the Chief Engineer immediately.'

'And the ship's water. Where did you get the ship's water, Captain?'

'It was freshly taken on in Port Said, sir.'

'Cholera, by God!' Broster exclaimed. 'I suppose you had it tested?'

Ebbs suddenly wondered whether he should have ordered someone to analyse it.

'Well, sir, I am hardly responsible——'

'Then it's cholera. No doubt about it. I have had a looseness of the bowels since Suez. It'll be round the ship like wildfire, and you'll be damn lucky, I should say, if you sailed into Aden with more than half your passengers still alive. Manslaughter, Captain! Murder, possibly. However, you are responsible for your own

folly.' He folded his arms, as if determined to die on the spot out of spite. 'Also,' he added, 'there are weasels in the bread.'

'If you really mean weasels I'll have them destroyed. But now I really must ask you to let me proceed to the bridge. I have to give my orders. Among other things, about your cabin and your eggs.'

'Well, don't forget, Captain.' Broster shook his finger. 'I may be simply an ordinary passenger—but I have my duty to the Line. I might tell you I shall be writing to Sir Angus very fully from Aden. Very fully indeed.'

'I hope,' Lino said earnestly, 'that you will then have no cause for complaint.'

'We shall see, Captain. We shall see. Ah, Father Hennessy,' he exclaimed, to a little fat man in tennis flannels and trousers, 'belong I bids to the companion-way. [Just a minute, will you? I'd like to go on giving you my views on the Roman Catholic Church.]'

Ebbs descended to the forward part of the boat-deck in a mood of deepening pessimism. He had set out with a bunch of conversational flowers, and they had withered in his hand. The interview with Broster was disturbing, and he had no time to compose his thoughts; he dodged under a rope that temporarily separated a small square of the deck for repainting. As it was empty for the crew's dinner hour he warily found a dry stretch of rail and leaned on it alone. At Aden the voyage would be half over. On the credit side, he was still in command of the ship. Mrs Porteous had apparently been shamefaced into silence. Shawe-Wilson now did no work at all but at least kept out of his way, and though his officers thought he was

insane, they had no suspicion that he had been on the same bed as one of his passengers. But if the ship's mail-bags went over the side in Aden stuffed with letters of complaint . . . The stark hull of the *Martin Luther* shimmered on the horizon like the *Flymo Dutchman*.

A light and hesitant jolt came on his shirt-sleeve. He looked round in surprise. A small straw-haired, large-eyed female child was looking up at him.

'Hello,' I bbs said. He had noticed bands of children roaming the deck. He said Dutchman opens, but he was too busy to notice them. 'What, all alone?' he asked, in surprise.

She nodded her head.

A small, slender, and very beautiful, lonely and misunderstood child, to be sure, but with a glow of sympathy.

'And what are you doing, all alone?' he enquired benevolently.

'I'm looking for my mother.'

'Now, but where is she?' he asked.

'No, he's not here,' she said. 'I think it's hopeless.'

'Where are you looking for her?' he asked.

'In the hall.'

'Are you sure?' he asked.

'I'm sure,' she said.

'How old are you?' he asked. 'Sixteen?' He had smiled expectantly, but she had looked for a moment at him with the dull, uncomprehending dwarf.

'Nim. How old are you?' he asked.

'That doesn't matter.'

She began to look at him with growing interest. 'Who are you?' she asked.

'I'm the Captain.'

'And what do you do?'

'I do lots of things.'

'What sort of things?'

'Well—things like finding out where the ship's going, and so forth.'

'How do you do that?'

'It would take a lifetime to explain, my dear young lady,' he said. He reached out a hand and patted her gingerly on the head, as he watched a strange dog.

'If you're the Captain, never a sailor, is it?' she asked.

'Cold?' Mr. Devereux asked. 'Are you here at the moment extremely hot?'

'No, you are not. The cause of the hotness is me.' She said, the Captain's hand was a blood of me.'

'What? And where is it? Do you feel that?'

'This is my hand, I was told.'

'Now let me see it, my dear lady,' he said, sternly. 'It is very nice, I'm sure, but I'm afraid the things you hear in my presence are very different from the things in her face. Do you mind me that? You must on no account tell me to my face, but in the Captain, and I can have him tell me to my face, but I like,' he continued, and he looked at her.

She dropped her hand, and her eyes spilt on to her cheeks. He looked at her, and he felt a little.

'Dear me, dear me, my dear lady,' he said. She continued to say so, he felt in his pocket for the half-crown he was sure of. 'Here you are—now go and buy your hair some more at the barber's shop.'

'Thank you,' she said demurely, grabbing the money with both hands.

Ebbs smiled at her again, and awarded her another amiable tap. How could she be blamed for repeating unintelligible gossip? He felt that his faith in humanity had been restored a little by her touching innocence.

'Run along, Priscilla,' he said gently. 'Bye, bye!' He turned towards his cabin.

Something hit him sharply between the shoulder-blades. A ball of cotton waste, soaked through in the bos'n's red lead, dropped with a splash on the deck.

'You little devil!' Ebbs roared.

'Captain's frigid, Captain's frigid, Captain's frigid!' she chanted exultantly, dodging among the passengers like a squeaking bat.

Ebbs started after her, but stopped hopelessly. 'Woman!' he said. He came into his quarters and slammed the door. He felt the water beginning to soak through to his bones. He had only one clean shirt to his credit. Adon, Adon, Adon! He was bound to start tidying up now, bowls

IN the afternoon it became hotter. By now the passengers' nerves were as sensitive as their skins. They all the while had been living in the *Charlemagne* which had had as little chance of escaping from the fire as to combat at *Alcala* and *Boulogne*. Every day told on the same too long to live and too short to endure. Their days were marched wearily between the milestones of their meals, with encouragement from the lesser posts of morning tea, afternoon tea, and sundew supper. Although the ship's gossip still counted each mile across the shipboard and every creaking cabin in the night into a new romance, the passionate attachments of the Mediterranean had begun to smoulder and die, and the oldon friendships north of Suez were hourly destroyed by such momentous trifles as using the ham-tray out of turn or regarding someone else's favourite pasty. Deck-tennis was played with Wimbledon acrimony, the bridge party was now conversed only in bids, and the crinklers were remained happy as they floated along in their soft protective pink cocoons of alcohol.

Then at dinner the air-conditioning broke down.

The *Charlemagne's* saloon had been designed in obedience to her ventilating system, and was as tightly sealed as a diving-helmet. The passengers sweated richly at the tables, picking their way through the ship's inflexibly English menu of roast beef and Yorkshire pudding. Ebbs felt his shirt-front sagging like a sheet of wet flannel, and he sat in silence with his eyes fixed glassily on the fruit-garnished centre-piece. Even the bickering Cokes were stilled by the heat, and Mrs Porteous spoke solely to ask Ebbs for the salt and pepper in tones suggesting they were objects of the closest intimacy between them. There was only Brigadier Broster to play the conversation like a solo on the tuba.

'In England,' he said loudly in the direction of Bill Coke, 'we live in large houses. Often very old houses. With picture galleries.' He ate a roast potato. 'I have a very large picture gallery in my house. It is worth many hundred thousands of pounds, I believe. Last year I had a man down to renovate my pictures. Clean them up, you know. Steward! Take back the horse-radish. And when I got home from my office, he continued, 'I found my wife very excited. She becomes excited very easily. "R.B.," she said. "The man has found a Van Dyck in the gallery." "Very good," I said. "I will go and see if he's right. But after dinner." In England we do not care to get excited, and to spoil our dinners. So we had dinner—smoked trout, I remember, followed by game pie. We had a bottle of some ordinary Burgundy. After dinner we took a candle and I had the butler bring a pair of steps. We looked for the Van Dyck—it wa

somewhere near the roof, in the darkness. Hadn't noticed it. I inspected it, and I said to my wife, "My dear," I said, "it is a Van Dyck." But it wasn't a very good Van Dyck. So we left it where it was.'

He stopped, and began to munch his salad noisily.

'What do you think of that?' he demanded.

'I don't blame you,' Bill Coke said absently, wiping his head and neck with a yellow handkerchief. 'Those bloody Dutch liqueurs never did me a wrong.'

The next morning Ebbs woke up covered with spots.

'It was the fish, sir,' Burtweed declared. 'I told the chef it was oil.'

'I don't care what it was,' he said. 'It's damnably uncomfortable.'

'Shall I send for the doctor, sir?'

'No, no!' Ebbs waved him off. 'I'll handle the medical profession with my teeth. I'll probably be in bed during the day.'

He sat down for a moment, scratching himself vigorously.

'With great care, sir, it behooves you to rub yourself with vinegar. Or a hearseful of it. If you'll pardon the expression.'

Ebbs grunted.

'There was one poor gentleman I was Tiger to,' Burtweed continued tenderly, 'reminds me. Captain Pick it was, from the old force. He came out in spots all over on the night of the outbreak. I remember it was Friday particularly because it was Good Friday - and by Easter Monday he was dead.'

'Burtweed,' Ebbs said warningly, 'keep at him. 'Go away.'

'I meant no offence, sir.'

'Get out!'

'Yes, sir. Shall I tell the religious gentlemen to wait, sir?'

'What religious gentlemen?'

'They've been outside the door since seven-thirty, sir.'

Six parsons came into the club, all looking disagreeable.

'Well,' Flibb said, wondering what could be the cause of the visitation. Suddenly remembering that he was addressing the company of parsons, he added as amiably as possible, 'and what can I do for you please?'

Canon Evans looked at his throat and stood on one foot. 'Cut it out,' he said. 'I feel a sensation—indeed, a divorce is necessary. I shall have it done already removed from the club for the table. But the table occupied by the parsons at the same club can no longer continue as it is. He lowered his eye. 'Mr Toddy here threw up his cornflakes at Mr McBride this morning.'

'Just look at my sock,' claimed McBride, opening his linen pocket. 'Ruined!'

'But what on earth can you expect to do a thing like that for?' Flibb asked, still scratching himself.

'He threw his potter at me first,' said Toddy hotly. 'He was a pale, decent-looking, civil young man.'

'Mr Toddy, McBride said, 'You are not only no gentleman, but you are also a cubical murderer of the truth.'

'Mr McBride, it is no use trying to cover yourself with bombast. I rather Hennessey saw you do it.'

'Mr Toddy, I tell you I never did any such thing.'

Besides, you have a disgusting habit of smothering up your cornflakes with marmalade——

'No worse than your quite nauseating practice of sticking bits of bread in your egg.'

McBride clenched his fists. 'Mr Toddy, I intend to give you a good hiding.'

'Mr McBride, please go ahead and try.'

'Gentlemen, gentlemen!' Ebbs cried, as Canon Swingle and the others intervened to prevent the deputation turning into a free fight. 'I would hardly have expected such behaviour. Really! Please remember yourselves. Of course, I can rearrange the saloon seating if strictly necessary, but it will cause considerable trouble to the ship——'

• 'I would not sit with Mr McBride to eat my last crust!' Toddy said shrilly.

'I may say I am quite content in my new place,' Canon Swingle murmured. 'Quite content.'

Ebbs called Fittlewell on the ship's phone as soon as Burtweed had shut the door on the clergy. 'What the devil do I know about these things?' he said. 'Has the whole ship's company gone mad?'

'Oh, it's only Red Sea nerves, sir,' was the unconcerned reply. 'We always expect an epidemic of complaints in the heat. Just give them the usual Company's guff.'

'The usual Company's guff!' Ebbs growled. As he picked up his knife and fork and poked at a cold sausage, a heavy woman with a snivelling daughter burst through the doorway and threw several closely-written sheets of ship's notepaper on his desk.

'One of your officers,' she said, 'sent my daughter that.'

Ebbe looked at the first line:

**'On watch below the tropic moon
I think of thee and thy sweet breast,
Ah, midnight comes! But not too soon.
I'll creep to where thou lie at rest. . . .'**

'Present my compliments to Mr Jay,' he told Burtweed without reading further. 'And ask him to come to my cabin immediately after his watch.'

The mother was followed by Danvers, who accused his cabin steward of not making up. Behind him was an honest English bucklayer, a emigrant from the eight-berth cabins on O'Clock, a sturdy voyager who refused to touch his books and traces in the climate.

'I don't care a bit that I'm making trouble, sir,' he said calmly, rejecting Mr Ebbe's Hepzibettes. 'I ain't the sort to let no one put no motto. Always I tell 'em. If the missus and me is parked in different cabins on the trip—well, fine enough, we're having it each our way. And I'm a white-headed man myself, but I'm a free man. When the blokes in my cabin woke up very early morning, and saw that 'ardie cation stuck out with a little red-headed but in bed with him—well, we clocked him off about it, and that's all. But the morning the missus wakes up, and I say, 'There he is sleeping like a babe with the same face, among seven other ladies.'

'Burtweed,' Ebbe said when the bucklayer had been hastened away with a vague promise of stricter segregation. 'No one else is to be admitted to my cabin—no one. I am feeling extremely unwell, I have hardly

started my breakfast, and I am in no mood to listen to the idiotic outpourings of passengers. Say that I'm steering the ship.'

'Very good, sir.'

'Yes, Sparks?' he asked, as the Senior Radio Officer came timidly to the door. He was a small diffident man with thick spectacles.

'Do you think this ought to go off, sir?' he enquired, handing Lbb a cablegram. After what you said about passengers' needs, sir, I thought I'd better bring it down.

Lbb read it.

MCV HIRRI V. L. OFF TO LON

SUBV. AT 10.10.50. INFLUENCE CAMPANT

*APOA 2.0.18.1.1.1.1.1.1

Lbb's face took the pangs for some time without expressing his feelings. He did not say a word, coned into a serious silence.

'Present my compliments to Lady and Mr. Potter,' he asked bluntly, 'and say I'm sending his knife and fork. And say that I'm sorry to hear of it.'

'It's no great loss,' he said, as soon as he appeared.

'But perhaps it might be worth considering this cable.'

'Why should I?'

'It might be a good idea to put it in the head office,' Lbb said, 'and let the people on the ships pick it up at sea. They might say it was mutiny.'

'I don't withdraw a word.'

'I have of course the right to prevent any cable leaving the ship,' said Lbb, baldly.

Football. The English International centre-forward Gorringe is receiving massage and heat treatment for the knee injury sustained in last week's cup-tie. It is expected that he will be fit enough to lead his club's attack in their needle match next Saturday against Arsenal. It is officially stated by his club that the inner ligament of his knee, which caused him to drop out of last month's International, is not causing trouble. There is a deep cut about an inch long below the right edge of the knee-cap. Gorringe netted four goals before he was injured last week, and has now notched sixteen goals in five matches. He is not under official training, but is said to be keeping fit by digging in his garden. Gorringe is a keen amateur gardener, and grows all his own vegetables.

London. The Cabinet resigned to-day.

Cricket, Sydney. The Sheffield Shield match between New South Wales and Victoria is causing unprecedented excitement as it nears its closing stages. To-day will tell if the Victoria batsmen can make the remaining 214 runs on a turning wicket rapidly deteriorating in one of the most phenomenal summers in Sydney's history. A Sydney spokesman yesterday described the weather of the last week as 'The greatest disaster in the history of New South Wales.'

New York. The President of the United States was assassinated this afternoon.

Paris. The Government fled because of revolution which broke out here yesterday.

Billiards. Mr Harry Evershed, the billiards and snooker champion, has recovered from a mild bout of influenza and will be able to compete in the snooker

championship next month at Thurston's as arranged. Harry Berried, who has now won the championship six times, is also holder of the world's record for a break at blindfold snooker.

Goole. Addressing a Labour Party Rally here last night, Mr Harry Cropper said 'The privileged and protected classes are again on the run, and they know it. They have been hiding behind the barricades of the rising cost of living, but honest working folk like you and me will start no nonsense and intend to ferret them out. Ever since Labour fast came to power in 1917, and the terrible years of Tory misrule that we remember, you and me though others are beginning to forget, the country has gone forward with the people, not backward with the banks.' Cheers and laughter greeted him.

His speech ended the rest of the programme.

'Not very informative, really,' Ibb said 'But hardly dangerous.' He placed the paper on the toast-rack. What a subject for a speech and how to develop different lines I wondered.

'Tootbad, tootbad, tootbad,' Bragwater Broster said savagely. 'And nothing but a very narrow except half a page of semi-Labour chapter. You wouldn't think the Conservative Party could be so stupid, that's what it is.'

'Do you take the chips press spooks?' Ibb asked.

'Oh, no, not! It's the young Second.'

'Is he a man of stable, radical views?'

'Well, he talks a lot, sir.'

'What about this racing? What possible interest has that?'

'The crew, sir.'

'But damn it, they hardly see a horse from one year's end to another!'

'The Barmán runs a book, sir. Captain Buckle tried to stop it, but he had trouble from the union.'

'You see?' Ebbs looked helplessly at Broster. 'Very good, Sparks. Please take press yours in future. And let me see it before it's duplicated. I've had it means waking me every night.' 'Yes.'

'Now, about my noble Brother, he is, is the Sparks left?

Ebbs held up his hand. He stood up and went into his cabin.

'Brigadier Broster,' he said. 'I only ask for fairness. You know well enough the circumstances under which I hold this commission. You know the difficulties that beset me on all sides. And I have done my best yet half over. All that I ask is that you should let me properly. I assure you that I will be a credit to the army.'

I have many other things to say to you.'

'I only ask for fairness, that's all.'

'Captain Broster,' said Sparks. 'I can't afford to give you a chance.'

Ebbs interrupted him. 'I'll see my point, sir. Suppose you had done this when the War Office for ever let me see you. I should have been when you were commanding your own regiment. Surely, sir, you understand.'

Broster pushed him and held him out. 'My commission in the Par Corps, but he never connected the compliment of a commission with me.'

'Well,' he said.

Ebbs gripped Broster's arm. 'And the help you could

“He to me, sir? You, whose experience of handling men—whose commercial genius—is foolishly allowed to run to waste on board.”

“I—”

“Yes, sir!” Ebbs pressed his advantage. “If it were not that I hesitated to burden you, I should have already asked you to do even more for the ship. I know you run the deck-tennis competition, the shuffle-board tournament, the house-keeping, the daily sweep, the debating society, and banquets. If there’s any other activity—”

Brooker interrupted. “I’ve not had the thought of giving a talk on my experience in China.”

“And so you’ll be in And so you’ll be!” This very night. There will be a free audience! I shall see to it myself. And in the meantime—”

Ebbs was still talking. Brooker blushed.

“You’ll be in the church?”

“No, sir. I’ll be in the church.”

“You’ll be in the church?” Brooker repeated. “But the dance follows after.”

“You’ll be in the church?” Brooker repeated. “You’ll be in the church.”

Brooker turned. “You’ll be in the church?” Brooker repeated. “You’ll be in the church.”

“I shall be in the church.”

“I’ll be in the church,” Brooker repeated. “I’ll be in the church.”

“Of course, sir. I’ll be in the church,” Brooker repeated. “I’ll be in the church.”

“Good day to you, sir.”

When he had gone, Ebbs sat at his desk with his head in his hands.

'Tell any other callers,' he said hollowly, 'bearing
Buried enter, 'that I have passed away.'

'Very good, sir.'

'And present my compliments to Canon Swingle.
Say Brigadier Broster will be reading the lesson on
Sunday. Both of them. Tell the Canon that if he refuses
I shall put him back at his old table With the five
others.'

'What about the hymns, sir?'

'We shall have the hymns. But I fear we
have not yet exhausted the pearl of the sea.'

15

Adler beckoned her to follow him on the ship, last
 night, at the library.
 As the velvet curtain flung came down
 from the head of the men's table, he was scrambling for
 the 'honey' but before he could get it, a summer's
 after 'noon' with the 'honey' he had to get them across the
 only hurdle to the narrow town beneath the sharp
 shoulder of the hill, where the people in summer and
 yawned at the 'honey' and 'honey' and 'honey' in the flimsy
 watchmen for the 'honey' and 'honey' and 'honey' in bright
 balls of 'honey' and 'honey' and 'honey' of Indian
 sandals. I had to 'honey' and 'honey' and 'honey' is German
 watchmen and American 'honey' and 'honey' and 'honey' explorers,
 who knew none of 'honey' and 'honey' and 'honey' since *Lothen*
 the importance of the 'honey' and 'honey' and 'honey' scrambled
 ashore to strike the 'honey' and 'honey' but the shorekeepers
 simply began to 'honey' and 'honey' with 'honey' and 'honey' and
 their 'honey' and 'honey' and 'honey' and 'honey' and 'honey' their visi-
 tors from their 'honey' and 'honey' and 'honey' and 'honey' and
 pleasantly as they 'honey' and 'honey' their meals.

On board, I lay on his pink sofa trying to distract
 himself with Willy Boast's book *Batting up Eyelid*.

evening into large pink puffy patches, which gave him the feeling of having just donned a new woolly vest inside out.

He picked up his cap and stepped on to the brilliant deck, with the demeanour of a man following his last childhood to the graveyard. The ship was empty. The decks rang only to the heavily footed tops of unbidden stewards, the dull cut tin-burners' bulbs were stilled, deck quart lay forlornly in their upper, and the saloons were bare except for White Point's mug in his usual corner of the smoking room. The sound of the sadly transient of a boat in the harbour, the hubbucked launch burst no doubt in the upper sky, but he saw Mrs Porteous, thin and dusty, close to a man in smart tropical dress. He noticed her after an instant as Shawcross.

'Unpleasant little fellow, but he'll get on with each other.' .

The conversation of the two men, which spattered with a few words of sympathy, now hid in an only barren air.

'How would I have been able to do that?' .

Earnshaw replied that he had a good long waste 'We're only just there. Another hour, I'd say.'

Hebsht had a look at his watch. 'A bit by my light then?'

Fainshaw would have been able to tell on the hot varnished top of the sun, but he was still shimmering inhospitably and he went to the deck to see the ships.

'Not much to be seen of them, but'

'No,' Earnshaw agreed, after considering the remark for some time. 'Still, it gives the passengers a run ashore.'

'Passengers?'

For a minute or so the Captain stayed silent. Then, on an impulse, Ebbs asked, 'Have a drink, Chief?

Earlshawe thought over the suggestion carefully. 'Aye, I don't mind if I do.'

In his cabin Ebbs rang the bell repeatedly. But Burtweed was far beyond call, soaking his feet.

'Lord knows what happens to the Tiger in port,' he grumbled. He scratched himself and rummaged in the cocktail cabinet for a whisky bottle and two glasses. 'It is somewhat curious of me not to have asked you up before, Chief,' he added politely, setting the drinks between them. 'I must have said I'm Mc-Nair and I'll be in touch with you later. I cover very much for the best part of your life, but in this way you don't seem to get time to do anything you want to.'

'Don't worry about that,' said Captain Earshawe said gruffly. 'I'm sure you're right. Yours is a full and busy life. I'm not a fighter. He picked up a glass of whisky and swallowed it.

'I wish I could do that,' he remarked, 'I've appreciated my position all my life. I've enjoyed it immensely, especially when I've been out to tell tales out of school. Chief, but I've got to go. I'll say my Chief Officer to us and be off.'

'I never did see much of the Shawe Wilson. A good kick to the back of the head, but no harm.'

'And some of the things he's about me! Better. Brigadier Prefect to me once. I'm not a malicious man, Chief, but by God I'd like to tear his entrails out with my back hand.'

'You want to put your mind on,' Earshawe said chidingly, slapping the table with his hand. 'You're the Captain, aren't you?'

'Yes, I'm the Captain,' Ebbs admitted sadly. 'But my position in that capacity is somewhat . . . somewhat . . .' He decided to say no more. 'Shall we have another drink?' he asked, as if suggesting a long walk on a wet day.

'I wouldn't say no.'

As Ebbs refilled the glasses Earnshawe leaned back, looked at him carefully, and declared, 'You have a hell of a life, lad, for a vor!'

'Do you know what' about the first kind word anyone's said to me since we left Tilbury,' Ebbs told him gratefully. 'I know the Captain leads a somewhat solitary existence. I'm used to that sort enough, it was just the same for Nelson. But for him? Do you know what I've been put in with now, Suz? He felt the stimulation of it all, the new, and complained, 'Complains, complaints, complaints! 'Captain, someone's writing a letter to my daughter . . . Captain, someone's clucked their breasts down my waistcoat. . . . Captain, my feet are itched with powder and scent. . . . Why the hell are we on the floor every-thing on board from brown butter tea-cakes to the political column of the big new paper. It's damnably unfair!'

'We always get it in the kitchen,' Earnshawe said calmly. 'It's the heat, and beer, cut up of each other from morning to night with sweet time to do. The passengers ain't used to it like we are. If they didn't let off steam by clabbing they'd be bloody murder in the passenger decks.'

'Not an unattractive alternative,' Ebbs said solemnly. He finished his drink in a gulp and coughed mildly.

'I'm not a drinker,' Ebbs explained, **pouing out**

more whisky. 'In fact, I can go from one voyage to the next without a drop. But I must admit, Chief, there are occasions when a glass of spirits doesn't come amiss.'

'Aye,' Earnshawe agreed. 'You've got to keep the machinery oiled.'

'How about you, Chief? How do you get on with the passengers?'

'Oh, I try and make 'em go on it.' I can have picked up a pencil lying on the table and ruminatively began picking his teeth. 'I'm a good engineer - I know that. Might as well be honest about it. I reckon I deserve a good shag and a drink. And so I pay the Social Joe to order. I've no alternative. If I don't want to sweat my guts out in one that I hate to tramp, I've got to pin on a decky and let the bloody booze do its part of the job. I don't like carrying powder on that's s'posed I don't like carrying out the powder - a bloody sight more untidy in the habit.'

'It's different for me,' I began, feeling the stirrings of self-pity. 'I've always wanted to command a passenger ship. Alas, I'm since I was a cadet so high. It's been the only ambition in my life.'

'My ambition, Lord, would be to run a farm.'

'A farm?'

'Yes. Ship in the middle of the country. Where you can't even smell the sea in a high wind and the only sailors you have to look at are on croquet jackets. I want to will to and my own luck with a gun under my arm and a dog at my heels. He put down the pencil, and began moving his hands round the table-top in thoughtful circles. 'That's all I want from life. Nothing more. I've got my eye on a place, too.' He stared for a while through the porthole at the hazy

Adam said. "It's about the right size. A good bit of land. On the edge of the Wolds, five miles the York side of Market Weighton. I know the fellow who farms it. I can have it any time I like, more or less."

"When are you going to buy it?"

"Oh . . . one day. When the wife's pools come up."

They sat in sad silence for some time. Ebbs refilled the glasses.

"You married, Captain?"

"No. Yes," Ebbs said. He reached for Burtweed's picture from the pipe-rack. "The wife and kids," he explained.

Earnshawe studied the photograph steadily for a minute. "They're like you," he decided.

Ebbs nodded, and replaced it.

"It's a grand institution, the family," Earnshawe said.

"A grand institution. You can't get away from it—there's no place like home, as long as it's your own."

"Quite," Ebbs said.

"To our wives, God bless 'em!" Earnshawe raised his glass.

"To our wives."

"Drink up, Captain," Earnshawe said smacking his lips. "Let's have another."

Some time later, Ebbs became more cheerful.

"Wouldn't it be fun, Chief," he said with a giggle, "to sail now and leave the ruddy passengers on the beach?"

The Chief Engineer considered the proposition for a while, rubbing his face forcefully with his palm. "No," he said. He shook his head. "It wouldn't be right, that wouldn't."

"Perhaps not. Still it's an idea." Ebbs stuck his hand into his shirt and scratched his chest. "This itch is

enough to make a saint swear,' he grumbled. Suddenly changing his mind, he kicked off his shoes under the table. 'And those bloody buckskins draw my feet something cruel in hot weather. I don't like 'em, but I've got to wear 'em. Why? Because I'm the ruddy Captain, that's why. In the old *Luther* now, I used to have plimsols, I could wear what I liked in the *Luther*. Nothing at all if I fancied. She wasn't a bad old ship in many ways,' he reflected, as if recalling an unhappy childhood.

'You'll not see the inside of that tub again.'

'I'm not so sure, Chief, I'm not so sure,' he said vaguely. He glanced through the open cabin door down the long, clean, empty, sun-drenched deck, and after a pause whispered, 'Quiet, Chief, isn't it?'

Half an hour later Earnshawe picked up the whisky bottle from the deck.

'Why, it's empty!' Ebbs said in surprise. 'But there's lots more in the cocktail thing. Pour out another drink and I'll tell you my secret. Do you want to know what it is?'

Earnshawe shook his head. 'I don't like hearing secrets. Then I don't have to keep 'em.'

Ebbs giggled. 'I'll tell you. I've had a woman in my cabin.'

'Oh, women?' Earnshawe dismissed the commonplace.

'She didn't stay, though.' Ebbs smiled wistfully. 'I quite wish she had now. Where are you going?' he added suspiciously, as Earnshawe got up.

'Down below. We're still bunkering.'

'Oh, are we?'

'I'd turn in lad, if I was you.'

'I'm not drunk, you know,' Ebbs replied in care-

fully-reassured tones. 'I haven't been drunk since since . . . oh, since last Christmas Good Friday.'

'I'd turn in, all the same.'

'S'long, Chiefy old lad. You're a damn 'good scout. Danin' good. A damn good scout.'

They shook hands ardently, and for a minute or so stood slapping each other on the back.

'Good-bye, Chiefy, old man'

'Good-bye, Captain'

When Ebbs was alone he fetched a new bottle from the cocktail cabinet and poured himself another drink. As he noticed the whisky splash over the table vague feelings of guilt lumbered through his mind, but they disappeared immediately again into the fog. Life seemed suddenly all contentment. He began to sing.

On the boat deck immediately below his open cabin door Mrs. Judd looked up in amazance. She had shared Ed's appreciation of the empty and silent decks for she was a kindly-hearted woman who had automatically relieved the position on board of the ship's Good Sport. If anyone wanted a dress mended, a baby watched, a contest presided, or a romance manoeuvred, they unhappily came to Mrs. Judd. Now she had settled in the outrageous luxury of a deck-chair occupied since Gibraltar by the hard-eyed wife of a General, enjoying for a few hours the impossibility of having to make up a fourth at bridge, read fairy tales to children, accompany a contralto against the distant glow of the ship's concert, or interpret for some idiotic civil the obvious intentions of her gallant. And some oaf of a sailor had ruined it by singing rowdily on the bridge.

The tune ceased. Ebbs appeared in his doorway.

'Good afternoon, Captain,' she said. She smiled. She liked Ebbs, whose unkempt appearance and desperately persevering good manners awoke maternal instincts in any good woman.

'Madam,' he said. He saluted with a flourish.

He gripped the rail, came carefully down the ladder, and saluted again.

'Your servant,' he said. 'May I sit?'

'Of course, Captain.'

He took the chair next to her.

'The ship's very quiet isn't it?' she said.

'We're alone.' Ebbs told her his loneliness.

'Why, Captain?' she began to laugh. 'You haven't got any shoes on!'

Ebbs clucked with surprise at his feet.

'Not have I?' he exclaimed. He turned and looked at her steadfastly. 'I have the devil of a life,' he said. 'The devil of a life. Nobody cares for me. Nobody cares about poor old Ebbs. Nobody minds if I were dead and bloody well buried. I've tea sent toward. His sharp cheekbones and creased heavily over the edge.

'Captain, really?' he said. She turned again. 'I do believe you've been a nigger.'

'I'm a devil on a beast,' Ebbs said, with some pride.

'Well, I'm sure you're entitled to be.'

'You understand, don't you?' Ebbs asked earnestly. 'You'll give me a hand word? Let me hold your hand. Where is it? Ah! Oh! you're in luck. I hold you. I need kindness. Nobody's kind to me any more. He gazed at her tragically, and shook his head. 'You're devilishly attractive,' he said.

'Hadn't you better be going back to your cabin?'

'Why?'

'The deck steward will be along in a minute with my tea.'

'What's that got to do with it?'

'I think perhaps you'd better.' She stood up. 'Come along, now.'

'But I want to stay here!' Ebbs insisted.

'Come along,' she said firmly. She took his arm.

'That's right, Captain. I'll help you up the ladder.'

In his cabin, Ebbs grabbed Burtweed's photograph and said: 'Little woman and little ones. See?'

'Very charming. Now, where's your bunk?'

Ebbs took on an outraged expression. 'No you don't!' he cried. 'No, you don't! I know your type!' He shook a finger at her, overbalanced, and grabbed her shoulders for support. 'You—you——' He began to giggle. 'You wouldn't be the first one,' he said coyly.

'I'm sure I wouldn't. Ah, through there I see. Now come along, Captain. That's the way. All right, hold my hand if you want to. Mind the step—careful!'

She thoughtfully turned on the fan and drew the curtains before leaving. When Burtweed came up at six Ebbs was lying on his back in his uniform, his mouth open and clutching in both arms the end of his voice-pipe. He looked like a child with his favourite teddy-bear.

female passengers. After that, even the *Martin Luther* would be too good for him.

'But why, why on earth, did I do it?'

'I've seen it happen very sudden with Captains during the war, sir. Release from strain they called it.'

'Possibly. But I am no longer braving torpedoes, Burtweed, merely the opinion of my passengers.'

'The, madam, sir,' Burtweed announced, withdrawing briskly.

'My dear good lady——' Ebbs began ardently, bounding across his day-cabin. 'How can I possibly tell you—have a chair, please—how can I possibly explain my conduct? How can I assure you that yesterday I was not myself? How can I apologize? Madam, I entreat you to believe——'

'Please, Captain!' She held up a hand, and smiled at him sympathetically. 'Don't worry about yesterday another little bit.'

'Surely you must think me a degenerate of the lowest type?'

'Not in the slightest,' she said cheerfully. 'You were perfectly charming. May I have a cigarette?'

'Yes, of course. . . .' Ebbs jumped forward with his sociable cigarettes, spilling most of them on the deck. 'I recall—with the deepest shame, madam, but I recall it—thrusting my attentions on you on the boat-deck.'

'Now don't say another word,' she told him firmly, smiling again. 'I only gave you a helping hand. Just as—well, your wife would have done.'

'My wife? Yes, of course.' Ebbs abruptly sank into a chair.

'You mean,' he continued anxiously, hope beginning to shine on him faintly, 'you don't intend to complain about my behaviour? I assure you, with all fairness, madam, you are more than entitled to. I have no desire to shirk the just—'

'You're completely forgiven,' she said with finality. 'Let's just forget the whole thing.'

'Mrs Judd,' Ebbs blew his nose. 'You are very, very good.'

'Not a bit. I'm sure you more than deserved your party. May I have a pinch?'

'Yes, yes, certainly.'

'Thank you, Captain. And don't worry. I shan't say a word to anyone.'

'You are indeed a person of virtue,' Ebbs said with deep relief. He pondered for an instant about the effect on the ship of two rumours circulating from different women. The first was an impenitent prude and a drunken lecher. Though he could hardly believe I deserve your goodness. You see there are certain circumstances connected with the command of this ship, he confessed, 'which make my position one but difficult. A complaint of any sort might have most unfortunate effect. I am really trying to do my best.'

'Of course you are, Captain! Why the way you handle those terrible people at the table is nothing short of marvellous.'

'Do you really think so? I asked eagerly.

'Aren't they an awful bunch?'

'Well, madam, it is hardly my position—'

'That man Broter! Isn't he the biggest bore in Christendom? Why, the number of times I've wanted to throw the casket at him!'

“Ebbs nodded warmly. How you echo my own sentiments, dear madam!”

“And isn’t that child Annette infuriating? If only she’d learn another two words her conversation might be almost tolerable. And as for Mr Dancer——”

“An effeminate type, I think?”

“Oh, very. And Mrs Porteous——”

“Ah, Mrs Porteous!”

“Boast is merely disgusting——”

“Quite. And the Cokes——”

“I do wish they’d keep their bickering for the bedroom. Now Mrs Lomax——”

“Surely she’s a harmless old lady?”

“Harmless? Good gracious, no! She gossips like poison.”

“Does she indeed? A reprehensible habit. Particularly in ships.”

“Oh, very.”

Ebbs blew his nose again. He felt the same unbelievable happiness that had overwhelmed him in McWhirney’s office.

“Just look at your hands!” Mrs Judd exclaimed. “Why, you poor man—you’re absolutely covered with urticaria.”

“It was the fish,” Ebbs murmured, as if apologizing for it.

“But you must be in torment! No wonder it drove you to drink.”

“The irritation is certainly an added trial.”

“I’ve got something in my cabin that’ll fix it in a jiffy. I’ll send my steward up with it. And your cuffs, Captain!” She laughed as she caught sight of a tear on the sleeve of Ebbs’s white jacket, which he had mended with the Company’s paper-stapler.

'The Captain certainly mustn't go about dressed like that. If you'll let me have it this evening I'll stitch it for you. Well,' she said, rising. 'I'm sure you've lots of important things to do, Captain. And I've to play my deck-tennis heat. It's with Brigadier Broster, and he becomes rather upset if anyone is late. So we'll meet at lunch.'

'Yes, of course.' Ebbs looked at her with admiration. 'Perhaps you would honour me by taking a liqueur after dinner this evening.'

'I'd be absolutely charmed. In the smoke room.'

'It is customary for the Captain to entertain in his cabin.'

'I'd be even more honoured. After dinner, then? Good morning, Captain.'

'Good morning to you, too, lady.' Ebbs blew his nose loudly and then when he looked up Mrs Judd had gone.

HAPPY of oaks are our snags!" sang Brigadier Broster, butily, as though demanding his hunch. "Heut of oaks are our fust! We always are ready! Steady, boys, steady! We'll fight, and we'll conquer again! We'll stand! A-gain and again! A-gain and again!"

He bowed, the thrice exposed its relief in applause.

It was a week later. The weather was cooler, the companyable fire of the dinner, thickly round the *Club*, as below, and her social process neared its climax with the ship's concert. Butcher Broster had insisted on that, it is unnecessary, and arranged the bill like the scout house of the Palladium with himself the star item. After half a dozen of the passengers had briefly tried the sounds angled by the Bos'n on the boat deck, Broster, trade fairly before the backcloth of mixed enigm to finish the performance alone. He had already done three-and-tricks, recited *B's*, told several stories about *Innmen and Scotsmen*, turned a hard-boiled egg into a billiard ball, imitated birds, and sung *What Shall We Do with the*

Drunken Sailor and according to the programme, he had still to render *A Wandering Minstrel* and *Rule Britannia* before capitulating to the National Anthem.

Mrs Judd, sitting in the front row of deck-chairs with Ebbs, touched him on the hand and whispered: 'Do you think we can escape?'

Ebbs nodded. They guiltily slipped from their places while Broster was noisily arranging his larynx for the next song.

'I'd much rather be running to you, William,' she said, smiling up at him as they walked quickly forward along the deserted deck towards him.

'Dear Edith! I do!' he suddenly 'How very sincerely I feel the same!' he breathed fondly.

For the moment, as it had been, so the thing an invitation came from the ship to hot weather is a fine invitation to the water, and within an hour of first setting sail the Green Chart case in his cabin Mrs Judd had revealed that her name was Edith, that she was a widow, her husband had grown tobacco in Kentucky, he was going to live with a sister in Sydney whom he had not seen for fifteen years, she was fond of seaweeds and long walks, couldn't stand bananas, her mother could but was subject to chilblains, and that night Mrs Judd was sitting at the same time she was a red hot devil as was his sister fond of sherry trifles as a friend of his had a brother who came to the end of the world and was to find a way of making a fortune out of it.

The next day he was surprised how coincidence repeatedly thrust them together. Whenever he appeared on deck he either strolled across her steamer chair or happened to find her taking the air on the rail out-

side his cabin. By the following night he had learned that she married her husband a week after meeting him, was thirty-two last birthday, slept in bed-socks in winter, had an operation for appendicitis when she was twelve, thought Ebbs was the most lovable man she had ever seen, and wore her stockings rolled below her knees in hot weather. She simultaneously found that Ebbs had an improving tenor, was once almost engaged to a New Zealand girl who abandoned him for an Auckland pork butcher, felt depressed in the tropics, thought slaves the most sympathetic woman in the world used to play the flute, and hated onions.

'How awful that you should have to do that!' she sighed. They were alone on the main veranda. Isilla had thrown the door at Ebbs. There were faint sounds of the orchestra from the Grand Theatre in the distance.

'But I must not ever mention Ebbs said wistfully. After all the end of the voyage is by no means the end of the world.'

She gazed at him. He had the faint chance in shade that comes into the human face.

'Dear William! She took his hand 'but what about your wife and family?'

'Ah, my wife and family.'

'You always become so serious when you speak of them.'

'Do I?'

'Yes, always. Is there forgiveness, William, I suppose it's really very difficult and none of my business—but is there any difficulty?'

Ebbs shrugged his shoulders. 'Only—up to a point, you might say.'

'She looks very charming from her photograph.'

'You thank so.'

'Yes. And your children. I suppose it must be wonderful, your welcome home when you've been so long at sea.'

'Oh, wonderful.'

'Do the children take after you or after her?'

'Have you noticed the phosphorescence on the water? Remarkably constant in intensity.'

She sighed again. 'I suppose really it must be heart-breaking being married to a man who must seem quite a trivial creature to his meemies.'

'Quite a trifle.'

'And then, I've never known a married man who is so attractive to women.'

'Oh, tut! I'll be a fool.'

'But it's true. I don't mean that you could have the heart of any young man but I mean you've picked on me,' she said with blushing satisfaction.

'You don't seem so much interested that Ibbotson asked, suddenly, picked up with a start.

'Oh, no! Not at all.'

'I should have to be talked about. And my position—'

'Tell me all about your husband's death. And your troubles.'

For a second the tropical breeze that gently rustled her dress tempted Ibbotson to tell her the truth about Burwood's photograph. But the sailor's caution which lurked in his subconscious that the nation's ships manoeuvring in unknown currents and fog, made him say instead, 'It's really a subject of very little interest.' Applause from the other end of the deck indicated that

Broster had finished. 'Perhaps we should be returning? I gather it's my duty to buy all the performers a drink.'

'But can't we have a night-cap afterwards?'

He patted her hand. 'Of course, Edith.'

'That will be lovely! Then I can finish darning your socks.'

Elbbs was a simple man, who had never had an affair since his disillusionment over the Auckland butcher, and he believed that his romance would go unnoticed by his passengers but they had little chance of ignoring it as a green spotted sea serpent surfacing off the port bow. He paced round the deck distributing smiles as lavish as the seawater from the Bos's's morning hose pipe, and now joined the little talk in the saloon like a cheery house waiter at the first supper of term. He waited on the coasters here, he told old ladies from their deck chairs, and even he told Brigadier Broster, while every man in ship's costume raked his character thoroughly with their sharp tongues. To the objects Mrs Judd had come in the flowing sun of springtime. A captain of good goods is affluent to arm the most underdone to trip to a happy home, but a captain in love accepts the ship's company like a rise in pay. Elbbs began slipping on the 'slippers' on the back, forgot about the champagne, told Jay not to overtax his strength and even made jokes on the bridge. Before long the *Chatham* had become one of the happiest ships afloat.

But one member of the crew disapproved.

'A charming woman, Mrs Judd,' Elbbs declared cheerfully, to Burtwood over breakfast, the morning after the concert.

'Yes, sir.' He promptly collected Ebbs' things and put them into its daily bundle.

'Such a sensible down-to-earth person,' he continued, taking up half a kidney. 'So frank and open. Not like some others I could name on board.'

'No, sir.'

'And she is a remarkable help to me in the ship. Over all sorts of problems.' He enumerated them with his knife. 'How to give the prizes for the children's sports, for instance. What to say to this impossible woman whose daughter's caught up with some tourist-class Romeo. How to pacify those females who tell me the ship's water ruins their hair or their underclothing. Furthermore, she completely cured my beastly spots. Oh, invaluable, invaluable!' he went on, readdressing himself to his breakfast. 'I only regret I had not made her acquaintance more fully earlier in the voyage.'

'Yes, sir.'

Ebbs looked up sharply. 'Burtweed,' he said, 'do I take it from your manner that you disapprove of my remarks?'

'Yes, sir.'

Ebbs slowly bisected a sausage. 'And why, pray?'

'Oh, sir!' Burtweed dropped the laundry, and stood before him with fingers entwined. 'Oh, sir! I shouldn't like to see you get caught, sir.'

'What on earth do you mean, man?'

'Oh, sir—forgive me, sir! I speak from the fullness of heart—but there's many a captain I've seen carried away, as it were, sir, right on his first voyage, before he's got wise to the tricks, sir.'

'Burtweed, you are talking nonsense. The lady is the soul of honour. And anyway, merely a companion.'

'I'd not my sword against the madam, sir. Not a word. But now she does your wools and your clothes, sir, and tidies up your cabin: . . .'

'The feminine touch, Burtweed.'

'But that's my job, sir. You're *my* Captain, sir—not the madam's.'

'God bless my soul Burtweed, you're jealous!'

'Besides sir—is *there*!'

'Right? My good man.' Libbs told him sternly, 'there, is not the slightest breath of impropriety . . .'

'But for a married man, sir!'

'But I'm not a married man, damn it!'

'Yes, sir. But you'll *be* you are, or Which is the same thing, sir.'

'Burtweed, what's the matter?'

'I have my friend, sir,' Burtweed said with dignity.

'Kind! Keep them to yourself. Ah, Mr. Shawe-Wilson.' Libbs exclaimed as the Chief Officer appeared at the door. 'A day every one would envy you. Capital day, is it not? You're looking *brilliant* today. Taking a swim before breakfast, I hear? Excellent, excellent! Now, what can I do to *assist* you to-day?'

LATER that morning Prittlewell stuck his head from the door of his office in the Square, and pointed at one of the bell-boys who passed their days pinching each other's behinds on the bench outside. 'You, boy! Go and fetch me the Barman. And tell him to make it snappy.'

He polished his monocle, then gazed at the crowd of passengers jostling round the ship's bulletin boards. They all carried bundles of coloured material, rolls of crepe paper, and bunches of funny hats, for the day of the ship's gala fancy dress dance had arrived. That night there would be jollity and ballcons, souvenirs and prizes, the last swill of duty-free gin, the last burst of shipboard comradeship, the last kisses of moon-ridden romances: the voyage was now almost over, and roped trunks already stood in the alleyways among the cabin litter of dance programmes, menus, lottery tickets, race cards, and redeemed wine chits, thrown out like a schoolboy's treasures devalued by the holidays. The next day would be dedicated to hurried packing and would end quietly with the official sadness of the *diner* *Andieu*, then many of the passengers would be tipped out

to the uncaring shores of Fremantle and leave the rest to hunt a joyless ship until Melbourne and Sydney.

'You've taken your time, haven't you?' Prittlewell snapped, when Scottie appeared. 'I haven't got all day to waste.'

'Very sorry, sir,' Scottie said humbly.

'I should think so. One of the passengers—Brigadier Broster, in fact—has complained you were insolent to him. What have you got to say to that?'

'I'm very, very, sorry, sir.'

Several of the passengers looked sympathetically as the barman roasted in the blaze of Prittlewell's stare.

'Not only were you insolent, but he's reported that you made a mistake mixing his White Lady.'

'It won't happen again, sir.'

'It had better not,' Prittlewell continued loudly. 'Furthermore, he tells me that he suspects you have on occasion given him short measure.'

'Never, sir! Never!' Scottie was horrified. 'I'm an honest man, sir—everyone knows that in the Line. I'd rather die first, than give short measure, sir.'

'Come inside,' Prittlewell ordered. 'We must discuss this further.'

Scottie went into the office, put his feet on the desk, unhooked the high white collar of his jacket, pulled an old pipe from his trousers' pocket, and began filling it from Prittlewell's tobacco jar.

'Well, Herbie boy,' he said as Prittlewell closed the door and locked it. 'We don't seem to have had much time for a chat this voyage.'

'You know what it is, Jim,' Prittlewell apologized. 'His Nibs up top.' He jerked a thumb towards the bridge. 'Best to keep up the old act good and strong.'

'Oh, you're right there, Herbie. Every time,' Scottie
it his pipe. 'Hear from the wife at Aden?'

'I had a line. She said your missus drove across with
a nice side of bacon. Thanks a lot, Jim.'

'Think nothing of it, Herbie. After all, we're here
on earth to help each other, aren't we? How's business
at the hotel?'

'Can't complain, Jim. How's the farm?'

'Fair enough.'

'Let's have a drop of Scotch,' Prittlewell said, going
to the locker. He winked. 'Not the stuff we give the
customers, eh?'

When both were comfortable with their drinks,
Scottie asked, 'How are we doing on the trip?'

Prittlewell unlocked a drawer in his desk and took
out a small red cash-book. 'Here's the takings handed
over to the Company to tally with stock,' he explained,
indicating the figures with his fingers. 'And here's the
cash you've taken at the bar. That leaves us—oh, about
a thousand quid apiece.'

Scottie nodded thoughtfully. 'Could be better, I
suppose. I promised the wife a new fur this voyage.'

Prittlewell agreed.

'It's difficult for a bloke to make a living these
days,' Scottie observed. 'I've loaded the bottom of the
measures as much as I dare. I stick in so much ice you
can hardly get the drink in the glass. I had all that
trouble with the Vichy water—'

Prittlewell grinned. 'You slipped up there properly,
Jim.'

'Well, how did I know they could see me at the
tap? I ought to have put more Epsom salts in, I
suppose. I'm getting old, Herbie, that's what it is.'

Losing the old trick. He shook his head sadly. "Sometimes I reckon it's almost time for me to retire ashore and pay income tax like everyone else."

"Go on with you, Jim. You're still one of the smartest in the game." Prittlewell patted him affectionately on the shoulder. "I tell you what. To-night, I'll get 'em drinking champagne."

"Ah, that would be something," Scottie reflectively pushed down the tobacco in his pipe. "I haven't had good bash at the old champagne game for years now."

"Leave it to me, Jim," said Prittlewell, tapping his nose.

"How about the Old Man?" Scottie asked, pointing heavenwards.

"Leave him to me too," Prittlewell said confidently.

The object of their anxiety was meanwhile standing in his vest in the middle of his calm declaring to Burtweed: "Come now! Let us dance."

Burtweed hesitated.

"Hurry up, man! This is a matter to be taken with extreme seriousness."

"Oh, sir!" Burtweed stuffed his cluster into a trouser pocket and reluctantly stepped into Ebbs's embrace.

"You are the lady, Burtweed."

"Yes, sir."

"Right. We shall start. One moment—!" Ebbs glanced at a book in his hand, and from a page thickly trodden with ghostly footsteps read loudly: "The gentleman starts with the left foot, inclining the weight of the body slightly forward and progressing evenly with the sole of the whole foot." Do you follow that, Burtweed?"

Ebbs, who was not a dancing man, usually avoided

the nightly signal square on the *Charlemagne's* boat-dock. But Elbbs paid her later than after breakfast that she wanted the first waltz.

'Yes, sir.'

'We will begin when I give the signal. It's all perfectly simple. Ready? One, two, three—go!'

Interlocked, they flailed across the cabin like a runaway threshing machine.

'One—two—three, • one—two—three, one—two—three!' Elbbs roared. 'Come along, man, come along!'

'Watch out, sir! Watch for the table, sir!'

'This is no time for timidity.' A table fell heavily to the deck, sending a pink-and-gold standard lamp crashing into one of the clocks. 'One—two—three, one—two—three—'

'Mind, sir! My feet!'

'Then keep them out of the way, man! Put your back into it! One—two—three, one—two—three—'

'The desk, sir! Look out—!'

'The other way, you fool! Keep it up, man, keep it up! One—two—'

• Burtweed stopped and howled: Elbbs had crushed one of his toes.

'Perhaps rather more difficult than it appears.' Elbbs confessed cheerfully, wiping his forehead. 'Where did you say you got this book from?'

'Off the cook, sir.' Burtweed looked reproachfully at him, caressing his foot.

'Well, I must say he shows great aptitude. This is worse to follow than *The Charcoal Pilot*. However, we shall persevere. Ready, Burtweed?'

'Oh, sir! Not again, sir?'

'Of course. That was the waltz, and now we shall

learn the slow fox-trot. You may be the gentleman this time. The hand goes in the small of the back, so. Ah, good morning, Purser,' he said, pushing Burtweed quickly aside. 'And what can I do for you?'

'I had come to discuss the arrangements for this evening, sir.' Prittlewell was once again the smooth ocean aristocrat.

'Capital idea. You may go, Burtweed,' Ebbs added, as the Tiger limped away pointedly. 'Strange that the voyage should be almost over,' he continued sunnily to the Purser. 'A really excellent voyage it's been too! I must confess, I felt my difficulties at the beginning. But ever since Aden things seem to have got very much easier. Do you think, Purser—I am not seeking flattery or idle compliments, I assure you—but on the whole, would you say I was, well, a not unsuccessful Captain?'

'Most certainly, sir! And it has been a great pleasure to serve under your command.'

'Thank you. Purser, thank you.'

'I hope I shall continue to do so for many years, sir.'

'And I hope so, too.'

'Very kind of you, sir. In fact, I want to ask you to accept, as a personal token of my esteem, champagne for your table to-night at dinner.'

'Oh, come, come. . . .'

'I'd far rather give it to you, sir, than allow it to stay untouched in the ship.'

'You mean, nobody on board drinks champagne?'

'Absolutely no one, sir. They seem to have lost the taste for it this voyage.'

'By Jove, Purser,' Ebbs said warmly. 'You leave it to me—I'll tell 'em all what jolly good champagne

we've got on board, and they'll all be ordering it by the dozen at the dance.'

'That would be very good of you, sir.'

'Delighted, delighted.' The gong sounded below. 'What lunch already? How time does fly. You'd better come back before dinner. I shall be turned in all afternoon.'

'I'm afraid not, sir. There's the children's tea-party.'

'Ah, the children's tea-party.' The single black cloud in Ebbs's sky crossed the sun. 'I suppose I really must go.'

'I don't think that Lady McWhinney would like it otherwise, sir.'

'Very well. Perhaps one of the passengers—Mrs Judd, sitting at my table—might assist me. What time do I appear?

'At three, sir. The children take a lot of interest in the Captain. They usually like to present him with a bunch of flowers or something of the sort.'

'Very charming, very charming. Well, I must get into lunch.'

• 'Perhaps you should put your shirt on first, sir.'

'Why, bless me!—as if my long absent-minded I've become the days, can't understand it.'

But Mrs Judd insisted that she was washing her hair that afternoon, and Ebbs had to reconcile himself to attending the tea-party alone.

19

By the time Libbs approached the children's saloon he was filled with feelings of genuine benevolence. Usually he mistrusted infants, but his current emotional state clothed him spiritually in perpetual red gown and white whiskers. He decided he would pat a few convenient heads, distribute the small silver rattling specially in his pocket, accept the present upon Louquet with a few dignified words of one syllable, then leave to continue his afternoon nap. He thought the experience would probably be both flattering and profitable.

As he reached the saloon doors a spasm of discouragement ran through him. It sounded like a free fight in the fore'sle of the *Martin Luther*.

The Pole Star Line was proud of its catering for children which was directed from London by Lady McWhirey herself. They had their own chef, their own dining saloon decorated with bright bulbous animals, several nurseries filled with satisfyingly destructible toys, and a shaded pen on the boat-deck where they could be safely left while their parents went off and played. The herding and feeding of the

Charlesworth's children were entertained by a motherly stewardess, assisted by half a dozen of the youngest and most trouble-making stewards on board, appointed by Frithwell as an alternative to more unpleasant forms of punishment. From Tilbury to Fremantle the children wallowed in teas and similar entertainment, but they generously repaid the Line's attentions, alone of the passengers they still found every day a fresh excitement, and they mightily added to their prayers a whispered unofficial supplication that the voyage might never end.

When Ebbs opened the door the full force of the party struck him like a storm on deck. The saloon was filled with faunes, pirates, ballerinas, cowboys, pierrots, Pompadours, and pixies, all creaming and elbowing vigorously round long tables for the piles of food. The younger and more timid were pushed aside, squealing protests. If a small guest saw a spicier one with a tastier portion, he crabbled it. The older children near the door had struck a mutually advantageous trace, and ate steadily without acknowledging their neighbours; the youngest at the other end of the saloon looked upon eating only as an incident to the main enjoyment of smearing the food on the bulkheads, the stewards, each other, and themselves, the children in the middle expressed the conflict of these two patterns of behaviour.

"God bless my 'oul" exclaimed Ebbs.

"The Captain!" cried the motherly stewardess. She was a pink, grey-haired woman with a figure like a bunch of balloons. "Look, kiddies!" She clapped her hands energetically. "The Captain, kiddies! Come along now, take that jelly bowl off your head at once,

Raymond, it's very naughty—here's the Captain say hello to the Captain! A big hello for the Captain, children—stop it immediately Mary, that's very rude—a big cheer, now—one, two, three—

A roar of greeting came from every mouth, heavily muffled by masticating food.

Ebbs blew his nose. 'Ah—good afternoon, children,' he said, as though breaking serious news.

'I *am* glad you came, sir!' the stewardess told him happily. 'The dear little things think so much of the Captain. And aren't they having a wonderful time?' Her eyes were shining. 'Doesn't it do your heart good to see it, sir? Why, I don't think I'd miss the children's tea-party for the world. Now I'll take you round, sir, shall I?'

'Is it strictly necessary?' whispered Ebbs. As the children were now taking no notice of him and had noisily returned to assaulting their food and each other, he saw a chance of escape.

'But they'd be so disappointed if you didn't, sir.'

'Very well,' Ebbs said. 'I suppose it's my duty.'

'This is Terence,' she began brightly, starting with a pale child decorated with a florid pair of burnt-cork moustachios. 'Say hello to the Captain, Terence.'

Terence gave Ebbs a look of deep malevolence.

'Why, Terence!' she scolded. 'You haven't eaten up your nice ice-cream. You *are* a naughty boy!'

'Don't like it.'

'Come along now! Eat it up like a good little boy.'

'It's nasty.'

'Nonsense! Of course it isn't nasty. Not nasty at all is it, Captain?'

'Not at all,' Ebbs murmured dutifully.

'Look,' she said, picking a large spoon from the table. 'The Captain will eat it. Won't you, Captain?'

She scooped melting pink ice-cream from the plate and offered it to Ebbs, who slowly opened his mouth and swallowed it.

'Jolly tasty,' he said gumily, trying to give the child a look of astonished appreciation. 'Yum, yum.'

'See, Terence? The Captain loves your nice ice-cream. This is Harriet,' she continued, switching him to a small and pecky fury queen. 'What do you say to the Captain, Harriet?'

Harriet gave Ebbs a long look, and burst into tears.

'Goodness gracious! Ebbs exclaimed. 'I trust I have not upset the poor child.'

'Oh, no, it's not always crying,' the stewardess flourished her expert needle and thread. 'She's been crying almost continually since we left London. And what is it this time, Harriet?'

'Don't like my jelly,' Harriet sobbed.

'But it's beautiful jelly,' Harriet interrupted, 'Captain?'

Ebbs nodded helplessly.

'Look, Harriet, she held up the child's own spoon. 'Watch the Captain. He loves your pretty jelly. Don't you, Captain?'

Ebbs took the orange jelly like a castor oil.

'There now!' the stewardess returned the spoon triumphantly. 'I told you it was nice jelly. Eat it up now, or the Captain will finish the lot. And this is Robert,' she went on, reaching a small boy in sombrero and spur, armed with a gun on each hip and one at the umbilicus. 'Why haven't you finished your sausage roll, Robert?'

'I think I must be getting back to the bridge—
Ebb began.

'Do stay just a little longer, sir! They love having
you with them, the little dears.'

'Wanna banana!' screamed Robert.

The stewardess shook her finger. 'Now, now, Robert!
You can't have a banana till you've finished your nice
sausage roll.'

'Wanna banana!'

'Eat your lovely sausage roll like a good boy, or I'll
be really cross. And so will the Captain.'

'Wanna banana!'

'But it's scrumptious, isn't it? The Captain likes
it, anyway. Don't you? I got Robert—see
how the Captain enjoys your lovely sausage roll?'

'Wanna banana! Robert insisted.

When Ebbs had some cold portions of the tongue,
sardine sandwich, tomato and cucumber, cheese
spread, and a little hot sauce, he saw that now might
try something else. So when he saw that he was beginning
to feel a little sick.

'Of course, sir. We'd play the old love games,
sir.' She dipped her hand. 'Good night, children!
Hurry and finish up. The Captain wants to play.'

The children, who had now calmed themselves into
nausea, streamed from the tables and surrounded Ebbs
expectantly.

'What shall we play, children?' she asked.

Immediately there was uproar.

'Musical chairs!'

'Postman's knock!'

'Ring-a-ring-o'-roses!'

'I spy!'

"Silence, children!" she called. "Don't all speak at once. Wipe that trifle off your face, Ernest. We'll play blind man's buff. The Captain will be the blind man."

"No I won't!" Ebbs said.

"Very well, we'll play oranges and lemons. Hold hands, Captain. Here we go, children! Line up, now! Let that little boy go, Rosemary, you're hurting him. Ready, sir? One, two, three—*Oranges and Lemons, Said the Bells of St Clements*. . . ."

The stewardess chanted gaily, they guillotined pairs of giggling children, and a deep sadness fell upon Ebbs. He recalled his seafaring career since he had first slung his hammock in the *Worcester* as an innocent overgrown lad. He saw himself stepping on to the deck of his first ship, an awkward cadet in a dangerously new uniform, off East for a two-year voyage in a rotting tramp with beetles for bedmates. Then working for his mate's ticket, struggling with books in his cabin and a merciless Captain on the bridge. Afterwards came his master's examination, following months ashore in chilly lodging overshadowed with the fear of failure. Next the war, with every minute likely to conceal a torpedo. Unending freezing watches on a shaking bridge and warm bunks left bitterly at midnight; sweaty stops in breathless Eastern ports, fog in the Channel, and ice in the Atlantic; a pile of accumulated pains, which had raised him to his present job—playing oranges and lemons with the children.

His reflections were stopped by a child whisking off his cap.

"Give me that back!" Ebbs shouted.

'You naughty, naughty boy!' called the stewardess. 'Naughty little boy! Give the Captain his hat back, immediately!'

Ebb's gold-peaked cap, decked with a stiff white tropical cover, went bouncing across the delighted children like a rubber ball on an ebbing tide.

'Give me that blasted cap!' he shouted, plunging after it.

'Give it back at once!' cried the stewardess, 'Jeanie, . . . Charlie . . . Robin! At once, do you hear? The Captain doesn't want to play any more!'

By the time Ebb had grabbed his cap, his white jacket and trousers looked like a nursery towel. He unthinkingly jammed it on his head, and felt something cold and sticky drop down his neck.

'I'm going to my cabin,' he announced with dignity. The children, joined with laughter, jumped up and down, and clapped their hands. 'What would the funny man do next?'

'Oh, but sir,' cried the stewardess. 'Aren't you going to give away the presents?'

'I am certainly not going to give away any blasted presents to this pack of hooligans,' he said angrily. 'Good afternoon to you, stewardess. I trust you appreciate that you have earned the complete set of whites? My laundry bill alone for this afternoon is considerable. The damage to my feelings is incalculable.'

'But please, sir,' she pleaded, 'wait for the presentation. Yes, I'm sure you will, sir! You can't go without the presentation. Where's the little girl who is going to give the Captain the bunch of flowers? Where are you, now? Little girl! Come along, little girl. Make haste! You mustn't keep the Captain waiting.'

A small girl with a large sun paper rose in her hair, dressed in a grass skirt and a wholly anticipatory brassiere, stepped forward with a handful of paper flowers. Ebbs recognized his acquaintance Priscilla.

'Sol' he exclaimed.

She stood silently before him, staring down meekly at her paper offering, as inoffensive as a cowslip.

'We have met before, young lady.'

She said nothing.

'You are a very naughty girl,' Ebbs continued sternly.

'Whatever you did say you're sorry to the Captain, dear,' the stewardess urged.

'I'm sorry,' she murmured.

'It was a shocking piece of behaviour,' Ebbs went on.

'I can't help it, she said humbly. 'I'm maladjusted.'

'Well, you had better take pains to adjust yourself.' Feeling he had perhaps been too hard, Ebbs added more indulgently. 'Anyway, we can forget it now, can't we? As long as you're sorry there's no reason why we shouldn't be friends. But don't throw paint at people again. Now let us proceed with the ceremony. Are those lovely flowers for me?'

She looked up at him. 'Dear Captain —' she began, in reproduction of a set speech. She paused. She opened and shut her mouth. Her usual pose was for once disturbed. 'Oooooo!' she said. Then she was sick all over his feet.

THE *Charlemagne's* adult enjoyments began at nightfall. For a week the passengers had stitched and glued their costumes in the stuffy secrecy of their cabins; the barber's shop had been stripped of cosmetics, the Doctor's surgery raided for slings and eye-shades, trunks unwanted since Tilbury were mined from the baggage-room by sweating deckhands, and every parson aboard forced to empty out his collar-box. At cocktail hour the passengers slipped shyly down the alleyways and burst into the smoke-room to gather applause for their ingenuity and needlework. Unfortunately, their inventiveness had run blindly down similar paths, and Scottie's cocktail shaker gathered squads of sailors and policemen, tribes of Bedouins and Zulus, convocations of clergy, a crèche of babies, and sufficient chefs to staff the Connaught Rooms.

'I congratulate you. I congratulate you all most warmly,' Ebbs said at dinner. He had recovered his composure and his appetite, and beamed round the heavily decorated table. 'A most artistic turn-out. It quite puts my uniform to shame.'

It had been the best meal of the voyage, at which

even Broster had become fairly amiable. The Brigadier sat at the table looking natural in the white shirt and tail of immaculate white, Bill Coke, pink and hairy, wore nothing but a turkish towel pinned round his loins, and was sucking from a baby's bottle filled with Guinness. Gwenny had plaited her blonde hair and decked her sturdy limbs in the bright blue chintz of a china shepherdess; Mrs Judd wore the best bell-bottomed uniform of the slimmest Quartermaster, commandeered by Ebbs; Mrs Lomax was a warmly veiled Salome; Dancer could do no better than his tennis flannels, and Willy Boast refused to let the serious progress of his evening be disturbed by such frippery as fancy clothes. Annette had come simply in her bra and pants as Jane, and Mrs Porteous was a nun.

'Quite an assembly,' Ebbs continued happily, looking round the unusually noisy passengers in the saloon, who had just reached the stage of throwing nuts at each other. 'I am really amazed that such talent——'

He was interrupted by a jubilant pop behind him.

'The champagne, sir,' Burtweed announced, as if ushering in a bishop.

'By Jove, bubbly!' said Dancer.

'My oath, plonk!' cried Bill Coke.

'My my, gigglegewater!' exclaimed Gwenny.

'I know a very interesting story about champagne,' said Brigadier Broster. 'I was staying in the country with some lord or other—I forget his name. He wasn't a very rich lord. In fact, he was a damnably poor lord. While I was there he heard he'd come into some money—not a lot, just ten or twenty thousand or so—and he thought we'd better celebrate. So he went to the cellar to look for some champagne. In England

of course,' he went on, swallowing half his glassful, 'we are very fond of champagne. We always keep some handy in our houses for birthdays and Christmas and so on. He found some champagne—a bottle of '19. He opened it. Flat as a pancake. Too old. So he opened a bottle of '20. Flat too. So was the '21, '22, '23, and '24. All flat. And the poor fellow had never been able to afford champagne since 1925. So we had to drink whisky and soda instead. Damn shame.' He finished the glass. 'Steward! More wine!'

'This is with the compliments of the Company,' Ebbs explained modestly. 'I hop you will all order lots more during the evening.'

'Do you know what, Captain?' Bill Coke said. 'We've had the finest time of our lives in this ship, and no mistake. Haven't we, Gwenny?' And who have we got to thank for that? Why—yea, Captain!'

'Hear, hear,' cried Mrs. Judd loyally.

'Oh, come, come—'

Two or three of the passengers started beating on the table with their spoons.

'It's going to be a real shame to leave the *Chatter-magne*. A real bloody shame,' Bill Coke continued, plunging abruptly into melancholy. 'Just think of it—a few hours from now, and we'll have packed our bags, gone down the gangway, and be scattered all over the ship. Never will we see each other again. That's what I call real sad, Gwenny.'

Gwenny touched her eyes quickly. 'I wish—I wish we could just go on living together like this for ever, for ever and ever.'

Under the stimulation of the champagne and these intoxicating sentiments, the table applauded loudly.

'Come and stay with us in Sydney!' Bill Coke exclaimed, extending his naked fat hairy pink arms across the table. 'All of you! Any time of day or night. Just ask anyone in Sydney for Bill Coke. They'll see you, right.'

'Stay a week, or stay a month!' Gwenny excitedly tossed her pigtails over her shoulders like the *Charlemagne's* stern mooring ropes. 'Stay a year if you like!'

'But you must come and stay with us,' purred Mrs Porteous. 'I absolutely insist. We'll all have lots and lots to talk about.'

'Dash it!' Dancer blushed and glanced jerkily round the table. 'If you're back in London next year, I'd love to put you up. Be delighted. Absolutely delighted. I'm in the book.'

'Any time you're in Town, Buzdier Broster declared gruffly. 'I'd be pleased if you'd come and dine. You can reach me through the Carlton.'

A squall of scribbling struck the table as they exchanged addresses. The irritations, squabbles, and jealousies of a voyage always stir in coastal waters: the passengers were now genuinely sorry to be losing each other's company, and autographed each decorated menu with lavish compliments.

'Ladies and gentlemen, called Bill Coke. 'I'm going to propose a toast. Guess who. Why, the bloke who's done a damn fine job. The fellow who's a real gent through and through. The Pommy. I'd take my hat off to any time. Ladies and gents— the Captain!'

'Hooray!' cried Mrs Judd, clapping wildly.

'Captain —' Bill Coke looked at Ebbs. 'I don't know how we'd have got on without you.' He suddenly climbed up on his chair, and for a second Ebbs thought

he was about to make another scene. But instead he waved his table-napkin violently above his head and the band in the corner paused, rearranged their rhythm, and struck up *For He's a Jolly Good Fellow*. "Three cheers for the Captain!" shouted Bill Coke, now beginning to glisten all over. "Three cheers for the Captain, everyone! Hip-hip-hip——"

The whole saloon rose and cheered. The passengers stood on their chairs, a few climbed on the tables, they threw streamers, waved paper hats, stamped, clapped, whistled, and began chanting "Speech! Speech! Speech!"

Ebb's stood shakily. He opened his mouth and tried to say something. Instead, he blew his nose. His soul was skipping across bright waves of happiness, like a flying-fish.

* * *

After dinner Ebb's opened the ball.

It was still warm enough for dancing to be held on the saloon deck, which was specially decorated with flags and Chinese lanterns and partitioned by the buffet and a replica of the *Charlemagne* in red cake six feet long. To a fusillade of champagne corks the fun began, soon Zuta was clutching flower girl, clergyman holding chambermaid, schoolboy dancing with concubine, and shirk with char. The ship's junior officers streamed from their cabins down below, for the evening traditionally waived the regulation forbidding them, on pain of instant dismissal, from speaking to lady passengers about anything unconnected with the urgent safety of the ship. The stewards' trays came heavily from the bar, the band played with an enthusiasm matching their record collection of free drinks hidden beneath the piano, the passengers began

to blow squawks, and when the lanterns bobbed wildly, the balloons bounced playfully overhead, and the deck began to vibrate with gaiety. And all round there was nothing, except the sharks.

"Dear, dear William!" Mrs Judd said, as Ebb jerkily propelled her through the thin first crop of dancers. "What a wonderful evening!"

"Dear Edith! Do you know, this has been quite the happiest day of my life."

She squeezed his arm. "You're such a success, William! I'm terribly proud of you."

"I have something I wish to say to you," he declared, as the music stopped. He had decided it was high time to tell her about Birtweed's photograph.

"Have you, William?" She looked at him with surprise.

In his bath he had prepared a short speech, beginning with the photo and then proceeding warily by dead reckoning. But its delivery obviously needed solitude, and preferably darkness.

He blew his nose. "Shall we try and find a spot on the deck?"

They began moving towards the rail, Lbbs beaming at the passengers like the vicar at a successful school treat. "How happy everyone looks!" he observed contentedly, catching sight of Captain Swingle in a fez, popping balloons with a lighted cigar. "There are indeed few sad hearts on board to-night."

But one of the sad hearts was then beating anxiously on the bridge. Shawe-Wilson leaned alone over the wind-cheater, frowning towards the dark bows. He rarely appeared there at all at sea, believing that the dull routine of navigation was more fittingly left to his junior

officers; but now it had become his only sanctuary from Mrs Porteous.

He cursed softly into the gentle wind. He had only himself to blame for a bad error of judgment. He had thought of her as a mature woman who could start and stop an affair as easily as the engine of her car, and now the bloody female had fallen in love with him. She dogged him on deck, sneaked unwanted to his cabin at night, and splashed after him into the swimming-pool as eagerly as an otter-hound. Worse than that only his most energetic charm had prevented her already sending her husband in Fremantle a cable telling him not to wait.

'I suppose the Old Man's fixed up for the night?' Jay said cheerily, appearing at the wheelhouse door with a tin of cheroots.

Shawe-Wilson coughed.

'By George, I wish I was you, Chief,' Jay went on brightly. 'I wouldn't be standing up here. No jolly fear, I wouldn't.' Shawe-Wilson was popular with his juniors, though he never bothered to worry if they did any work or not. 'As soon as I'm off watch I'll be down there shaking a foot. You bet I will! What do you think of the turn-out?' He had renounced his afternoon sleep to take his turn with the officers' electric iron, and wore a white uniform as crisp as folded paper, which he inspected closely every few minutes in the chart-room light lest it had become contaminated with rust or prunework.

'You look very beautiful,' Shawe-Wilson said sourly.

'You know, Chief,' Jay went on, becoming serious. 'I'm glad you've come up. I was going to ask you for some advice. You know all about--well, women, and

things, don't you? I mean—well, everyone knows you do. You see——' He rubbed his hands together slowly. 'You see, Chief. I've met a lovely little girl on board. A real smasher. But a—a spiritual sort of smasher, if you get what I mean. She sits at the Old Man's table. Her name's Annette. I meet her every morning when I'm sticking up the noon position in the Square. We haven't actually—actually spoken, you know. Company Regs. and all that. But she's obviously a jolly decent girl. Jolly decent.'

'Never,' said Shawe-Wilson forcefully, 'have anything whatever to do with women at sea.'

'But Chief——' He looked at him with amazement. 'I mean there are lots of jolly nice women at sea, aren't there? I mean—well, clean genuine sort of girls. Not no nice sort of women. Chief I mean——I don't mean——that is, the sort of girls a chap can—sort of live with. Do you get me, Chief?' he asked desperately. 'What should I do about Annette?'

'Kick the little bitch. Or throw her over the side,' Shawe-Wilson said.

Feeling he could stand no more he went down the ladder toward the port. He stood on the edge of the dance floor, a cigarette in his mouth and his hands in his pockets, his dancing pumps weighed heavily with melan choly. Mrs. Prouce was still not in sight; but he knew sure enough that she would soon appear on deck, and come trotting after him bubbling over with endearments.

'What a bloody life!' he groaned to himself. He realized sadly the penalties of being so handsome and so charming.

Looking round, he noticed a plain girl dressed as a Red Cross nurse, who had been staring at him shamelessly from the edge of the floor for some time. To take his mind off his problem and treat himself to the pale flattery of making her evening unforgettable, he asked on an impulse:

'May I give you a dance?'

She fell into his arms with a sigh.

'You must think me terribly! terribly silly,' she said, as soon as he started spinning her expertly across the floor. 'But—well, I just can't believe it.'

'Believe what?'

'Why, with all those girls on board I never thought for a moment you'd ever take any notice of poor little me.'

'Not a bit,' Shawe-Wilson said automatically, trying not to wawn. 'As a matter of fact, my dear, I've been simply itching for a chance to dance with you ever since we left London. But of course, I have to get round everybody somehow.'

'Have you really?' She looked at him excitedly. 'Wanted to dance with me, I mean? Do you know what I've hoped or I dreamed about? All the voyage—ever since Tilbury. I've just been wanting you to say something to me. A word or a smile—that's all. Nothing more. Just as you were passing by on the deck. And now . . . and now you're actually dancing with me! Isn't it wonderful?'

'Where do you live in England?' he asked, feeling he ought to change the subject.

'In Warwickton. I bet you've never even heard of it.'

'Yes, I have,' he said politely, closely inspecting over

her shoulder any other girls in sight. 'There's a castle there or something, isn't there?'

'Yes, that's where we live.'

'So you said, my dear. In Warwickton.'

'No, in the castle.'

'Oh, yes?' Shawe-Wilson immediately restricted his gaze to her face.

'Daddy bought it last year. It's near all his factories and things in Birmingham.'

'It's terribly silly of me, but I've forgotten your name for the second. . . .'

'It's Sally--Sally Pritchett.'

'I suppose no relation to Pritchett's motors. . . .?'

'Yes, Daddy does make a lot of cars. But all sorts of other things besides, of course.'

'I believe I've met your brother,' he said, trying to keep step.

'But I'm an only child!'

'Your parents! Are they well?'

She sighed. 'Mummy's very poorly these days. That's why I'm bringing her home from Australia.'

'And your father?'

'Poor dear Daddy! The doctor says he could drop dead any minute. There! The music's stopped! What a shame. Now you'll have to go.'

Shawe-Wilson took her firmly by the hand. 'You shall have the next dance, my dear. And the one after that. And the next. And the one following. It's not every night I have the chance of dancing with the most beautiful woman on board.'

'Beautiful?' She looked at him in astonishment. 'But I'm not really beautiful.'

'To me,' he said, 'you are the most beautiful woman

in the world. Let's have a look at the boat-deck in the moonlight, shall we?'

He glanced at his watch. It was already eleven. The *Charlemagne* was due off Fremantle the following midnight, and he had Mrs Porteous to settle as well. He would have to hurry.

Ebbs was meanwhile having less luck with his courting. That night the boat-deck was bright with fairy-lights and noisy with couples, and he had just squeezed Mrs Judd into a shady space between the paint store and the engine-room hatchway and blown his nose, when Canon Swingle and his female gymnasts sought them out and hilariously dragged him back to their table on the dance floor. Remembering he had a duty to the ship, Ebbs obediently sat down and recommended the champagne, while Mrs Judd stroked his hand under cover of the paper table. After the gymnasts Ebbs was greeted by a succession of passengers, until at midnight he found himself sitting between McBride and Toddy, who were blowing squeakers, whistling at the girls, and calling each other 'hummee'.

'I fear we have been somewhat frustrated,' Ebbs said to Mrs Judd as she finished a dance with Earnshawe. He began leading her purposefully towards a well-thought-out niche behind the fire alarm gear. 'It so happens that I had — ah, something particular to tell you, Edith, dear. Something that I — ah, thought I ought to tell you — as it were.'

'Yes, William?' She looked at him, her eyes shining.

'You see,' he said, manoeuvring her round the funnel. 'It's like this. I — well, you see. That photograph——'

'Captain! Captain! Where the devil's the Captain?' Brigadier Broster's voice roared faintly above the music.

'Oh, dear!' Ebbs groaned.

'Don't take any notice of him.' Mrs Judd gripped his arm.

'Where in blazes has the Captain got to? Where is he? Just let me get hold of the Captain——'

'I think I'd better go,' Ebbs said nervously. 'You never know what he might be up to.'

'Har!' exclaimed Broster, as Ebbs reappeared under the Chinese lanterns. 'And what is the meaning of this latest piece of blackguardry?'

Ebbs was too astonished to reply.

'Lining your pocket at the Company's expense, eh, Captain?' Broster's face began to suffer little twitches.

'I have not the slightest idea what you are talking about,' Ebbs said, becoming angry himself. 'But it hardly seems that your language is befitting a gentleman. Not to say slanderous. I will remind you, Brigadier, that the laws of the land apply just as strictly at sea——'

'And so they do, Captain! And so they do! Look at that!' he pushed a champagne bottle under Ebbs's nose. 'Smell it! he begged. 'Sniff it! Taste it! Swallow it!'

'Why? What's wrong with it?'

'Wrong with it? Coke—a class!'

Bill Coke, standing shamefacedly in his bath towel behind him, passed an empty champagne glass from the table.

'On your recommendation,' Broster continued, as though issuing commands to a firing-squad, 'I ordered—and paid for—Veuve Clicquot '47. And what do I get? Cider, damn it, or I'm a Du chman!'

'But it's impossible!' cried Mrs Judd, standing faithfully at Ebbs's side. 'It's an outrageous suggestion!'

'Try it, then, madam! Try it!'

She took a sip.

'Well, madam? Well?'

She said nothing, and looked anxiously at Ebbs. 'It is cider,' she whispered.

'There! I told you so! What did I say? It's nothing but barefaced —'

'Quiet, quiet!' Ebbs shouted. He felt the *Charlemagne* was suddenly disintegrating round him. 'I assure you it's only some perfectly genuine mistake. They've got the labels mixed up, that's all. The Purser will put it right in a second. Where's the Purser? Where's Mr Prittlewell? Who's seen the Purser? Why, he was here just a minute ago. He can't be very far away.'

'Yes,' said Broster. 'That's the question. Where is the Purser?'

Ebbs found Prittlewell and Scottie hiding in the small locker behind the bar used for storing glasses.

'This is extraordinary behaviour, Purser,' said Ebbs, breathing heavily. 'Quite unlike you, I must say. Running away when I need your support the most. A remarkable thing has happened — the champagne has got mixed up with the cider.'

'Scottie made an unfortunate mistake,' Prittlewell said, polishing his monocle nervously.

'That's just what I told them,' Ebbs said. 'But I must say, it's a very difficult one to explain.'

'It's all my fault.' Scottie sat down miserably on a case of gin. 'Gawd! After all these years. Fancy making a slip up like that!'

'Well you must do something about it at once. Open some bottles of cider—possibly they're full of champagne.'

'I said I was getting old, Herbie, didn't I?' Scottie shook his head. 'I should never have palmed off the ciders on the old gaffer. Any barman half my age would have seen he was a regular champagne drinker.'

'Looks as though you did make a bit of a mess of it, Jim,' Prittlewell admitted.

'I'm sorry, Herbie. Honest, I am! We were doing a treat, too—good three hundred nicker in the kitty. And all that work I put in on them bottles! Ah, well.' He mopped his forehead with his glass-cloth. 'We lives and learns I suppose.'

'Don't take it to heart, Jim,' Prittlewell consoled him. 'There's always the next time.'

'Just one minute, if you please.' This had been following the conversation with interest. 'Do you mean—and I to understand that you served the passengers with cider—deliberately?'

'Be your age,' Prittlewell did not say. 'You don't think we come to sea for our health, do you?'

'How dare you, 'Er Prittlewell! How dare you, sir! I will remind you that you have committed a most serious—extremely serious—crime. Which I assure you will not go unpunished. No, indeed! Not for a moment. You will pay for this offence most severely. I shall not have the slightest hesitation in bringing you before the criminal authorities directly we touch Trementale. Don't think you can expect any mercy from me. I will not take the slightest breath of impropriety—'

'I shouldn't be in too much of a hurry to have us locked up,' Prittlewell said. 'You're on this as much as we are, you know.'

'Me? Ridiculous! How?'

'You seem to have forgotten that your signature appears all over the account books. If anyone asks me, I'll tell them you were in with us. Lock, stock, and barrel.'

'Mr Prittlewell!' shouted Ebbs, turning pale. 'You wouldn't dare.'

'I certainly would. We're all—er, in the same boat, aren't we?'

'I will not yield to your threats,' Ebbs said. 'I will not—not for one moment.'

Prittlewell shrugged his shoulders. 'I wonder what you're going to do about us?'

Ebbs stared at him, at a loss for words.

There was a crash outside. Scottie briefly opened the locker door and whispered, 'Crowd! They're breaking up the bar!'

'Well, our Captain will stop them,' Prittlewell said calmly.

'I certainly will not!'

'Go on, Captain. Millions of dollars on board are your job. You can't plan away the champagne at the same time.'

'Mr Prittlewell, it's a matter of—'

Another crash and shouting from outside interrupted him. The excited passengers were now churning over the unattended bar and helping themselves.

'Go along, Captain,' Prittlewell said gently.

'Blast you, Mr Prittlewell!'

Ebbs squeezed out of the locker and jumped on to the bar counter against the torrent of dancers. 'Wait!' he shouted desperately. 'Ladies and gentlemen! Please! Please! I have an important announcement—I implore you! Just one minute! Listen to reason——' No one

took any notice of him. 'Please, ladies and gentlemen! I really must ask you, in the name of reason to listen. Just for one second. Respect Company property, please I can explain everything. Absolutely everything. I——' Someone playfully squirted a soda-siphon over him. 'God damn and blast you!' he cried, suddenly losing his temper. 'God blast the bloody lot of you! Go and wreck the bloody har! Go and sink the bloody ship! Go and jump over the side, the whole bloody crowd of you! As far as passengers are concerned, I'd rather carry cattle!'

Wiping his brow with his handkerchief, he jumped on the deck, knocked two men out of his path, and strode de pairingly to his cabin.

21

ELBS sat at his desk, experiencing the sad relief of a freshly convicted criminal. The hopeless struggling and subterfuges were over, and now he had only to compose his soul as nobly as possible for his punishment. As a passenger captain he was a disastrous failure. Within an hour of Broster's certain cable reaching London another would be on its way telling him that his services were no longer required; and within a few minutes of stepping ashore at Tilbury he would be led away, manacled to a policeman, dumped in a Black Maria, taken to the Old Bailey, and tried for embezzlement.

'So much for Captain Elbs,' he sighed. How bitterly he wished he'd stayed in the homely *Martin Luther*!

He looked up and found Ruitweed standing in the doorway with a tray.

'I brought you a bite of supper, sir,' he said softly.

'A kind thought, Ruitweed. But I fear I am not hungry.'

'I also have a message from the madam, sir. She wishes to know if you'd care to see her.'

Elbs shook his head. 'Please say that . . . that I

appreciate the thought. But just now I should prefer to be alone. I shall look forward to seeing her in the morning. To say farewell,' he added. What was the point of saying anything else, when he had nothing to offer her but his chains?

'Very good, sir,' Burtweed said gently.

'It has been a somewhat unfortunate evening,' Ebbs continued remorsefully. 'I have behaved very foolishly. Losing my temper like that.'

'I'm real sorry, sir. Real proper sorry, I am. There's no one I'd be more sorry to see up the creek than you, sir. And that's straight.'

'It had to come sooner or later. I suppose. We find our limitations in the end, Burtweed.'

'Is there anything what I can do, sir? To help?'

'It is quite possible that you will be obliged to pack my few belongings in a trundle. By this time to-morrow I might well be relieved of my command. Mr Shawe-Wilson, who I suppose is at least honest, will no doubt be promoted to this cabin. And I——' He bowed his eyes. 'I shall be sent home in disgrace.'

'No, sir! Never!

'Disgrace is all I deserve.' He picked up his modest mermaid and pushed it toward the desk slowly. 'I hope, Burtweed, that as far as you have been concerned I have been a good and just Captain?'

'Never a better, sir!'

'Thank you, Burtweed. Such words do not come aniss at the time. I shall see that your services are suitably recommended to the Company. Not that, I fear, my recommendation will carry much weight.'

'May I——' Burtweed bit his lip. 'May I wish you the very best of luck, sir? With the greatest respect, sir?'

'Thank you, Burtweed.'

They shook hands solemnly.

'And I'm—I'm sorry I was cross, sir. About the madam, sir.'

'All is forgiven,' said Ebbs, with the serenity of an accomplished martyr.

'Thank you, sir. I knew you'd understand, sir.'

'Now, Burtweed, I must put a few of my affairs in order. I have many trials ahead.'

'Good night, sir.'

'Good night, Burtweed.'

When he was alone, Ebbs drew a sheet of ship's writing-paper from his desk, clipped his pen in his horseshoe inkstand, and began drafting a letter.

'Dear Sir Angus,' he wrote. 'It is with regret that I tender my resignation from the Company. . . .'

He looked at this for some minutes, then added, 'in obedience to your urgent cable of to-day's date.'

He paused, and stared gloomily at the tip of his nib. He wondered how he was going to earn a living ashore. He was forty-two, with no accomplishments beyond a capacity for navigating large ships round the world in open waters. He tried to remember the present employment of other unfortunate Captains: one was a seaside pier attendant, another sold boot polish at the door, and a third had some vaguely policing position with a row of bathing huts. Then he suddenly felt a draught of cold comfort from remembering that he would at least be freed from the problems of employment for several years to come, owing to imprisonment.

There was a knock on the door.

'Yes, Mr Jay?' he said discouragingly.

'I'm - I'm terribly sorry to bother you, and all that, sir. Terribly sorry, sir.' Jay stood stiffly at the storm-step, his cap tight under his arm, pressing his left toe into the deck with his right heel. 'You see, sir. Well, sir. I rather thought——'

'What is it man, what is it!'

'I was sort of well, actually, thinking of getting married, sir.' Jay explained, staring straight in front of him. 'And I thought, sir, that as you had nothing to do just at the moment you might be able to—sort of perform the ceremony, sir—' He jumped back with a yell as Ebbs threw the ink-pot at him, and went and locked himself in the officers' lavatory.

Ebbs continued his letter in pencil. After he had covered a page and a half there was another rap on the door.

'Go away!'

'... I assure you, sir, my greatest crime has been trusting my fellow-men.' He wrote, frowning at the paper.

The knock was repeated.

'Yes, yes! What the devil is it now?'

Willy Boast was in the doorway. His face was pale, his hand shook on the handle. He opened his mouth, tried to speak and staggered back—he could

'Man overboard!' he gasped

'You're drunk!'

'No I'm not! Not very, anyway. There's someone overboard—the lady at our table.'

'Good God! Miss Jude?' For a second Ebbs imagined that she had performed a conveniently appropriate form of suicide.

'No, no. The other. Mrs Porteous.' Willy Boast fell

into a chair and held his head in his hands, 'I saw everything—everything! I couldn't get a drink because of that rumpus round the bar. I went on deck. She was there—standing by the rail, crying her eyes out. The poor child!'

'Crying?' Ebbs felt Mrs Porteous's soul would have to be drilled deeply to strike tears.

Willy Boast nodded, and two large sympathetic drops splashed on to the letter of resignation. 'She was dressed like a nun.'

Ebbs suddenly began to feel worried.

'She said . . . she said she had a broken heart. She was going to cast herself into the deep. Those were her very words. When I came back she was gone. Gone.'

There was another knock on the door. The fat Quartermaster stood outside with a nun's coil and veil.

'This is about the nitty-gritty!' Ebbs exclaimed. His first thought was that it was typically inconsiderate of Mrs Porteous to commit a suicide when he already had so much on his hands. 'Very well, we must search the ship, I suppose,' he said, instinctively reaching a swift decision. 'I am still the Captain, and I have my duty to everyone on board.' He threw his pencil aside, stood up, and reached for his cap. 'You will accompany me to the bridge, Mr Boast.'

'Don't happen to have a nip about you, do you?'

'I certainly do not. Quartermaster—kindly fetch the Chief Officer.'

'Aye aye, sir.'

Willy Boast went to sleep with his head on the chart table and started to snore. Mrs Porteous's cabin

was reported empty, her black nylon nightdress still neatly laid across the turned-down sheet. By then, Ebbs was sufficiently alarmed to call out the watch below, summon Brickwood and Bowles, and order them to search the ship.

'And where,' he said, 'the bloody hell is the blasted Chief Officer?'

'In his cabin, sir,' said the Quartermaster.

'Then why the devil didn't you give him my message? Haven't I had enough to put up with to-night already? Has *everyone* gone crazy?'

'I did give it, sir. He said to tell you he was occupied, and to say he'd be along when he could manage.'

Shawc-Wilson appeared in the chartroom ten minutes later, scowling heavily.

'Mr Shawc-Wilson' Ebbs asked. 'Where have you been?'

'What's that got to do with you?'

'I will remind you that that blasted lipstick off your face.'

Shawc-Wilson sulkily wiped his cheek.

'Mr Shawc-Wilson, the present moment is too urgent even for me to give you a command that you so richly deserve, and certainly will get. It happens that Mrs Porteous has most probably committed suicide by jumping from the ship.'

'What!'

'Yes, Mr Shawc-Wilson' Ebbs continued forcefully. 'I thought that would upset you. When did you last see her alive?'

'Why—I spoke to her on deck about midnight,' he said, looking frightened.

'Did you have—ah, words?'

Shawe-Wilson was silent.

'Did you?' Ebbs shouted.

'Well, we did have a sort of a tiff,' he admitted.

'Aha! That will go badly against you at the court of inquiry, Mr Shawe-Wilson!'

'I should think you won't look too good,' Shawe-Wilson snapped. 'After all, she's been to your cabin.'

'Oh, you know about that, do you?'

'Yes, I do. I only kept quiet about it to please her.'

Ebbs blew his nose loudly. 'Mr Shawe-Wilson,' he continued, 'to-night I have had many trials to bear. I have been accused of robbery in public, blackmailed in private, and exposed to the ridicule of the entire Pole Star Line by losing or tampering with a habble of drunken passengers armed with soda syphons. As all these events will certainly result in my dismissal from the Company as soon as the necessary cables are exchanged with London, I have the small compensation that I can keep treating myself with the gentlemanly consideration I have foolishly afforded them during the voyage. Mr Shawe-Wilson, you are an unspeakable dirty blackguard, who is not fit to collect the tickets for deck-chairs on a paddle steamer to Margate. I have no doubt whatever that you will come to a sticky end, and I only hope that I shall have the satisfaction of reading about it in the Sunday papers. As you are useless for any duties concerned with the navigation and conduct of the ship, you might as well go below and I continue your lechery with the poor woman who I have no doubt you are concealing there.'

'Look here - '

'That is all, Mr Shawe-Wilson.'

'I won't be spoken to by a third-rate tramp-ship Captain——!'

'Quartermaster! Escort Mr Shawe-Wilson from the bridge!' Ebbs blew his nose again. 'Good night, Mr Shawe-Wilson!' After all, he thought, there were some advantages in being sacked.

There was no sign of Mrs Porteous.

'Very well,' Ebbs said firmly. 'We shall have to reverse course. Mr Brickwood!'

'Sir?'

'Kindly give Sparks our position and tell him to wireless all ships in the neighbourhood to keep a sharp look out for a nun.'

The *Charlemagne* swept back in a circle, extra look-outs clattered urgently down the ladders towards the fore'ste head, and Ebbs paced the bridge in silence wondering with more sin than he ought to follow his passenger over the rail. The officer gloomily watched the black water beyond the narrow streaks of the bow waves. Everyone on the bridge knew the search was hopeless and conducted only out of respect for the log-book and the court of inquiry, for by then Mrs Porteous had certainly been carried away beneath the tim or a contented shawl.

Before dawn, Ebbs said wearily to Brickwood, 'I'm turning in. I think I've had about as much as I can stand for to-day.'

'Very good, sir.'

'Resume course in half an hour. Call me if you see anything. Call me anyway at five, and I shall cable the Company. I thank you, gentlemen, for your services.'

he continued dejectedly to the two officers. 'They will be given credit in the log-book. Though after this disastrous day I fear it will be the last act I shall perform in this or any other vessel.'

'The two Mates exchanged sad glances, then Ebbs went slowly down the ladder, leaving them saluting at the top as if he were a corpse disappearing into its grave.

Poor Mrs Portcock, he thought as he made for his cabin. She wasn't a little bit at heart. And someone at least was worse off than he was. Though in twenty-four hours the whole of them would be tanking round their love, and God knew what there was in store for him behind them.

He opened his cabin door. He stopped, his hand on the light switch. He heard a voice.

'Not good,' he muttered.

He turned on the light. Persilla was sitting at his desk in her night dress, looking miserable.

'Well God bless my sweet Aunt Lanny! I Libs exclaimed.

She dropped her eyes and looked penitently at the bitten half of her chocolate.

'I'm hungry,' she explained.

'Oh very nice, are you?' Libs said. 'And let me tell you, my girl, that this time you have gone too far. Much too far! Do you realise it is extremely dangerous for little girls to wander about the ship in the middle of the night like this? With practically nothing on, too,' he added primly. 'What would your mummy and daddy have to say, may I ask?'

'They're blotto,' she told him.

'That's nothing to do with it.'

'They wouldn't let me have any supper,' she said.
'Because I was sick.'

'I should think not!'

'I—I wasn't *very* sick.' She looked at him steadily for a moment, then suddenly began to cry.

'Now, now, now, little girl! You mustn't cry. Not here, anyway. You must go back to your cabin. All right, you can finish your cheese sandwich if you like. I'll wrap the rest up in the doily and you can take it with you. But please try and stop making that filthy noise.'

She went on howling.

'For God's sake shut up!' Ebbs yelled. 'Or I'll kick your beastly little teeth in!'

She stopped, and stared at him in amazement.

'And how the devil did you get up here anyway?' he demanded.

'The lady sent me,' she said meekly.

'Lady? Which lady?'

'The lady that thanks you a good deal.'

'What?' Ebbs crouched down beside her. 'Are you sure? Where is she?'

'I won't tell you.'

'Priscilla! Please!' he pleaded. 'When did you see her? Where? Tell me there's a good girl.'

She bit her lower lip.

'Priscilla! I'm your friend, aren't I? You remember me, don't you? I'm the Captain.'

'You were nasty to me,' she told him. 'I don't like you.'

'But—but don't you remember, I gave you half a crown?' Ebbs said desperately. 'Please, Priscilla! Think of all those lovely cream buns and things at the party.'

We were great pals, weren't we? Just tell me where the lady is—and then . . . And then I'll wake up the Chief Steward, and you shall have ice-cream and sausages and pickled walnuts and oclars and anything you want and as much as you like,' he promised lavishly. 'See? On my word of honour, Priscilla.'

She looked at him carefully, judging whether to forgive him or not. for a second she held his future in her sticky little hand. Then she slipped off his chair.

'I'll show you,' she said

•Ebbs followed her on to the deck, down the ladders, and into the passenger accommodation. She skipped along the empty alleyway ahead of him, turned the corner, and stopped.

'There!' she pointed

It was a closed door

'Are you . . .

She nodded

Ebbs' nose felt. There was no reply. He rattled the handle. It was locked.

'This is the Captain's door. It's closed up.'

Silence

He pushed the door with his shoulder, kicked it open, and switched on the light.

'Why, bless my soul!' he exclaimed. Suddenly he began to laugh. 'Well, well!' he said. 'Talk of the devil!'

22

'We are men of the world,' said Brigadier Broster. 'Oh, quite.' Ebbs agreed cheerfully. 'Men of the world.'

It was almost noon the next day. The *Charlemagne* was forcing herself at two extra knots across a bright calm sea, barely twelve hours away from port. Ebbs was sitting in his cabin, his feet on his desk, a look of contentment on his face, and his hands clasped comfortably across his stomach.

Broster took a cigarette from his pocket.

'Smoke, Captain.'

'Thank you.'

'At sea,' Brigadier Broster went on, offering Ebbs a match, 'a certain - shall we say? - lack of convention . . . a certain *camaraderie*, a certain incitement to adventure, are almost traditional.'

'I agree perfectly,' Ebbs said.

'Better men than I, Captain,' Broster continued sombrely, 'far better men, have fallen under the magical spell of the ocean night

'Of course.'

'Which I'm sure you'll agree, Captain, is highly conducive to feelings of an irresponsible nature.'

Ebbs nodded. 'So it seems.'

There was a pause. Broster looked at his cigar as if trying to identify some strange object.

'A degree of discretion, Captain. . . .'

'Ah, discretion!'

'A man in your position must surely feel a sense of responsibility about such things. After all, a captain of a ship at sea is the repository of many confidences. Willing and unwilling. And what goes unrevealed about a man, Captain,' he added with emphasis, 'is often of much greater importance than what is said.'

'Much greater,' Ebbs observed, blowing smoke towards the deckhead.

'Well now,' Brigadier Broster beamed at him. 'Surely we can come to some understanding?'

Ebbs took his feet off the desk. 'Brigadier Broster,' he began briskly. 'The fact that I discovered you with a woman in your cabin is not a matter that obliges me to make an official report. Though no doubt the story would—because of your important position in the Line—make something of a stir if it was given out.'

'Certainly,' Broster said heartily. 'I'm not denying it.'

'Not to mention the effect it might have on your wife. Who I believe will be waiting for you on the quay at Fremantle?'

'Ah, yes,' Broster went on thoughtfully. 'I should certainly prefer the story to stay away from her ears. Mrs Broster would be deeply distressed at hearing about my moment's foolishness—which was precipitated, I must insist, wholly through taking pity on a poor woman in tears.'

‘I’m sure she would.’

‘I think far too highly of my wife to submit her to such pain. Besides, she is a lady of extremely quick temper and might not be entirely responsible for her actions. No,’ he decided, ‘it would be best, Captain, for the little affair to remain a secret between us. Just a little secret. We have had our differences during the voyage, to be sure. But of course there was nothing personal in it. Not for one moment! It was the officer, not the man, that I occasionally criticized. I did so only because I had the Company’s interests at heart. As you have yourself, I’m sure. But now all is forgiven and forgotten,’ he went on more brightly. ‘We are approaching our journey’s end. Soon we shall be safely in port, with the troubles and trials of the voyage sunk behind us without trace. We must part as true good friends, Captain. I give you my hand.’

‘One moment,’ Ebbs drew thoughtfully on his cigar, ignoring Broster’s cage-palm. ‘It so happens, Brigadier, that in this case matters have been somewhat taken out of my hands. It is not simply that you were — ah, chambering with a fellow passenger. At one-thirty last night the vessel was turned about on her course to search for this woman, for whom the alarm had already been raised, the watch below turned to, and the ship searched from truck to keel. The ship’s log-book, Brigadier —’ He severely tapped the foolscap book in front of him with his touchstone. ‘An official document, inspected every voyage by the shipping authorities in London, and perused minutely by Sir Angus himself. As Captain of the ship I am obliged by Act of Parliament to enter a full and truthful account of why we altered course last night, and also the reason

for resuming it again. To omit or to falsify the facts makes me liable to severe penalties under the law. Not to mention my professional dishonour. I shall therefore be making the correct entry. Almost immediately.' Ebbs picked up his pen 'Good day to you, sir.'

'One minute!' The ash shook loose from the end of Broster's cigar. 'Is it strictly necessary for you, Captain, to be absolutely explicit?'

'My conscience demands it.'

'But surely! Not every detail—'

'Every single one. Including the remarkable sight—'

'Captain,' Broster said earnestly. 'I am a man of vast influence in the Line. I don't have to tell you that. I have power that extends right into the board-room, and beyond. I have the ability to bestow favours even beyond Angus McWhirrey himself.'

'Ah?' Ebbs said. 'Now you're talking.'

'What,' asked Broster as if he were valloving pieces of glass, 'can I do for you, Captain?'

'Have a seat,' Ebbs said. He picked up the pile of slap's newspaper on which the night before he had written his resignation. 'You have a pen? Good. All I wish you to do is write a letter. No—Ebbs corrected himself. First of all I want you to send a cable. I will dictate it. He considered for a moment. "'McWhirrey Binnacle London,'" he said. "'Magnificent voyage ship first class Captain excellent." Sign it "Broster." Don't worry,' he added as the Brigadier wrote out the words doubtfully. 'I shall pay the cost. Now for the letter "Dear Angus —" That's how you usually address him?' Broster nodded. 'Good. "Dear Angus I'm writing to let you know as soon as possible how

highly I think of that fellow Ebbs.' Ebbs blew his nose. "'He has done a simply magnificent job. He has all the qualities of a fine passenger-ship Captain, and I certainly recommend that he be retained in the *Charlemagne* for the present. Afterwards, of course, he may be needed in one of our newer and larger ships." I'm not going too fast for you?" Ebbs asked.

"No," muttered Broster.

"Ebbs—" New-paragraph, by the way. "Ebbs particularly won my respect for the way in which he tactfully dispersed a crowd of drunken passengers becoming unruly just before arrival in London. I also commend the energy with which he directed out the machinations — Can you spell it? There's a dictionary in the desk."

"Scheming," might be better, Broster granted.

"Yes, scheming — scheming of the dishonest Purser and his men, whom I earnestly entreat you to deal with according to the tenets of Captain Ebbs's report. An excellent fellow, Ebbs, with a brilliant future in the Company. I shall keep my eye on him." Ebbs grinned, "Sign it your usual way, if you please. Address the envelope. I will post it as well."

"If you should find yourself tempted to repudiate this letter at any time, Ebbs continued pleasantly, scribbled and folded the paper, "remember the *Charlemagne's* log-book. I can make the necessary entry any time before we return to London." He chuckled. "Well, Brigadier, I see no reason why the wartime friendship you envisaged between us a few minutes ago should not now come into being. We have quite a tie between us. We certainly have one thing in common, anyway." He chuckled again. "A private joke of my own—you

wouldn't understand. Excellent cigars, these. Have you any more?"

'I'll send a box to your cabin,' Broster growled.

'Thank you. Perhaps we shall sail together again in the future. . . .?'

The Brigadier rose. 'Captain Ebbs,' he said with deliberation, 'one thing you may be certain of: whatever your fate in the Company henceforward as a result of that piece of outrageous forgery—whether you end up in jail or, as I'm afraid is more likely, as the Line's Commodore—you may be sure of one thing. I shall make it my business never to set foot again in any ship with you in it. Good morning to you, sir!'

As soon as Broster had gone Ebbs began to roar with laughter, and when at last he looked up he found the Chief Radio Officer was standing over him anxiously.

'What is it, Sparks?' he asked, wiping his face with his handkerchief and letting his mirth drain away in an eddy of chuckles.

'Cable for you, sir.'

'From Fremantle?'

'No, from London, sir.'

Ebbs opened it, still grinning. 'Sparks!' he called after him. 'Kindly present my compliments to Mr Shawe-Wilson and ask him to step into my cabin, if you please.'

Shawe-Wilson appeared with his hands in his pockets. He greeted Ebbs with a smirk and asked, 'You wanted me for something?'

'Certainly, Mr Shawe-Wilson. Come inside, please. I trust you have recovered your temper this morning?'

'That's a bit thick!' He sat on the edge of Ebbs's desk and helped himself to a cigarette. 'I for one managed to behave like a gentleman last night.'

'Mr Shawe-Wilson,' Ebbs said amiably. 'I will remind you that we are still in the same relationship in rank as we started the voyage. The friendliness you now demonstrate is most heartening, but I feel I really must ask you to behave a trifle more formally in your Captain's cabin.'

'Got a light?' Shawe-Wilson asked.

'Over there. Yes, I feel that nevertheless ---'

'I shan't be with you much longer,' Shawe-Wilson interrupted. 'I'll be leaving the ship as soon as I sign off in London.'

'Really?'

'Yes, I'm getting married.'

'Congratulations.'

'I'm giving up the sea. I shall be living in Warwickton. Do you know it? My fiancée's got a castle there.'

'No, I have sadly neglected my beauty spots.'

'You must come and stay when we're settled.'

'I should be delighted.'

'We shall be married pretty soon,' Shawe-Wilson went on. 'My fiancée has altered her plans, and she'll be sailing home with us. It'll be a May wedding. I suppose at St George's, Hanover Square. There isn't anywhere else really, is there?'

• Ebbs blew his nose. 'Mr Shawe-Wilson,' he said, 'I have no doubt you will do everything possible to marry this unfortunate girl sooner or later, but you will certainly not be doing so in May. I have a cable here from Leadenhall Street. I will read it to you: "Transfer Fremantle Chief Officer J. R. E. M. W. Shawe-Wilson

for voyages based Hong Kong until expiry articles
S.S. *Martin Luther* arriving next month.' "

Ebbs wondered for a second if he was going to be
struck.

'It's a lie!' Shawe-Wilson shouted.

'Read it, my dear fellow' Ebbs waved the paper
playfully.

'It's a forgery!'

'Radio for confirmation if you wish. The rates are
not high.'

'They can't do it! They've no right to!'

Ebbs put his feet on the desk again.

'Oh, but the dear Mr Shawe-Wilson, Company
Regulation you know. The articles you signed in
this ship in London didn't you to say committed you a
period of eighteen months for the sum of £1000 per
month? If you don't you'll have to go on your
ship in the morning. I suppose it is arranged
by the agent that you can't do it. I require
of a good officer that he must appreciate Mr
Shawe-Wilson.'

Shawe-Wilson gently nudged Ebbs's cigarette box on
the desk.

'The *Luther* is a first class short-handed officer
possibly the best in the world at present. At the end
of the *Luther* he will have remained at sea for at
least six years, so you will be brought home when
your article expires in a fortnight. He looked
at his hundred years' calendar. Sixteen months and
twenty eight days. Then you will be able to claim
your bride. If she has waited for you. Ebbs
jammed his finger tips together. 'Good day, Mr
Shawe-Wilson. That will be all.'

EVERY on a bright Australian summer morning the *Chalmer* left her anchorage in Craigie Roads and floated slowly up the Swan River towards the mud wharves at Fremantle. On deck, most of the crew stood idly to the rail, standing in the ordinary of the Fleet. Their business was varying in its seriousness below the decks as the stewards were cooking and compounding in bulk, and the ship's band were battling bravely with their hangovers to strike up *Marsch Mahler*. Unbelievably, the voyage was over.

The *Chalmer* had left Fremantle unnoticed but to the wharf heeded 'as it is to whom home' is always the vision of Fremantle: foggy green, cottage-spattered, copper-policed, butters and painted, her arrival was an event of almost national importance. Below the long piers welcome to Australia the swimming crowd threw streamers which floated prematurely on to the water, and as the anonymous mass of people on the rails began to crystallize into faces, they tried to shout greetings across the noisy conversation that the ship was holding with her tugs. Soon

the gunways pierced the *Charlemagne's* sides and her passengers began streaming down to the quay. 'After almost a month whose chief problem had been how to pass the time they faced again the familiar vexations of society, now represented by the Customs man, the passport officer, and the surly porter already complaining of the high cost of living and the insufficiency of tips.

'They fly forgotten is a dream,' Libbs quoted scornfully. He was with him as his passengers disembarked, unseen in a corner of the bridge. He blew his nose with deep feeling.

The maid came with her, and Buttwee, jumping up the ladder.

'All, good?' called out a batch of loud, noisy, cheerful, but not very intelligent, Buttwee. 'For about half a century, what understood?'

Libbs called out, 'A very good one, but not much to be got out of it.' 'But not much to be got out of it,' he said.

He called out, 'He is a very good one, but not much to be got out of it.' 'But not much to be got out of it,' he said.

'I never see you any more, but I am glad to see you now, and I am glad to see you now. He looks like a very good one, but not much to be got out of it.' 'But not much to be got out of it,' he said.

'I never see you any more, but I am glad to see you now, and I am glad to see you now. He looks like a very good one, but not much to be got out of it.' 'But not much to be got out of it,' he said.

'Well, you are a very good one, but not much to be got out of it.' 'But not much to be got out of it,' he said.

'Surely there is something you want? Anything, my dear fellow—just name it.'

'I could do badly with some more foot salts, sir.'

'Foot salts?' Certainly. Order as much as you like from the barber's shop. I'll sign the chit.'

'You are very, very good, sir,' Burtweed said with feeling.

'Nonsense, Burtweed. It was the least I could do. I hope they will give you many hours of enjoyment. And now to my private business.'

'Alone at last!' he cried, bounding into his cabin and throwing his cap into the corner. 'Oh almost, at any rate.'

'Dear William!' the Judd was sitting forth in the corner of his sofa. 'She's going to be a very quiet ship round to Sydney.'

'Ah, but you will be a liar, my dear,' he said, sitting down beside her and looking at her head.

'You don't sweet darling!' She very calmly retired his hat.

'Are you?' He sat up and looked at her sternly. 'And now, I have something to say to you.'

'Yes, William?' She settled herself more comfortably.

'Listen, my dear. As we have never each other, very short time. A few minutes, namely, at each other's?' She looked at him.

'But never!' she said the words with a half-smile. 'We have come to know each other well. Extremely well. Remarkably, in fact.' He went back across the deck and picked up Burtweed's cap, stooping solemnly.

'I'm going to begin, I think, by making a confession.'

'Confession?' She looked surprised.

'Oh, not an unpleasant one. I assure you. On the contrary, a very pleasant one. One that, in fact, puts everything in quite a different light. Quite different.'

A light that, I must confess, I should like to have shed on things much earlier. You see, this is not really- --- Yes, Burtweed? What is it?" He looked up crossly as the Tiger pulled aside the door-curtain.

"Beg pardon, sir. But one of the passengers wants to say good-bye at the gangway."

"Burtweed, I thought I told you distinctly I was not to be disturbed?"

"Pardon, sir. But it seemed special, sir."

"Oh, all right." Ebbs impatiently slipped the photograph into his pocket. "Will you excuse me, Edith? I won't be a minute. Don't go away," he added.

"I won't," she said brily.

"Who the devil is it?" Ebbs whispered, as he stepped from the cabin.

"Mrs Porteous, sir. I didn't like to say."

"Quite right—quite right."

"She sent a note to be delivered direct, sir."

Ebbs opened a folded piece of paper and read:

Captain Tug—don't you go out to say good-bye to a girl I must see on the boat, and I can't do it. I shall tell you I P.

"Where is it?" he asked nervously, screwing up the paper.

"By the first class side port, sir."

"I do not deny it, I suppose."

Mrs Porteous, already hot in redundant blush, turned to him, "Captain, I do so much want you to meet my husband."

"And—ah, how do you do?" Ebbs said, shaking hands awkwardly. He had often tried to imagine Mrs Porteous's husband during the voyage and had seen

him vaguely as a mixture of Superman and Mr Anthony Eden. He turned out to be a gallow, fat, amiable fellow in thick spectacles and a check suit.

'Now run along and see to the baggage, darling,' Mrs Porteous said. 'I'll stay here and say good-bye to the Captain.'

When they were alone she smiled at Ebbs and said, 'I was a very naughty girl, wasn't I?'

'Well . . . you must admit, madam, there have been moments.'

'I could have sworned when I saw your face-- the night you found me in your cabin.'

'Perhaps we needn't discuss that now.'

She laid a hand gently on his arm. 'I am the goddess of discretion.'

'I'm sure you have reason to be,' he said primly.

'Well, Captain, she went on softly. 'You seem to have done well for yours. Four of the voyage, in that respect.'

'Yes,' Ebbs agreed, wincing, to the conversation. 'I really believe I have.'

'Such a nice person, Edmund Judd.'

'Very nice.'

How silly to think, Mrs Porteous went on, 'that we needn't let loose the coin for you at the beginning of the trip.' She sighed. 'And she won. Ah, well. I suppose my technique isn't what it was. Still, I bear her no malice.'

'I am gratified to hear it,' Ebbs said, civilly.

'After all, her need is so much greater than mine. She's getting on for thirty-eight ---'

'Thirty-two. She told me so herself.'

'Did she? You know how long she's been widowed, of course?'

'Two years. She told me that, too.'

